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# **A Diachronic Investigation of the Semantic Field ‘Death’**

by

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**Submitted for the Degree of M.Phil.**

**To the University of Glasgow**

**Department of English Language**

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Thesis  
10624  
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<b>Praline</b>	Look matey ( <i>picks up parrot</i> ) this parrot wouldn't voom if I put four thousand volts through it. It's bleeding demised.
<b>Shopkeeper</b>	It's not, it's pining.
<b>Praline</b>	It's not pining, it's passed on. This parrot is no more. It has ceased to be. It's expired and gone to meet its maker. This is a late parrot. It's a stiff. Bereft of life, it rests in peace. If you hadn't nailed it to the perch, it would be pushing up the daisies. It's rung down the curtain and joined the choir invisible. This is an ex-parrot.
<b>Shopkeeper</b>	Well, I'd better replace it then.
<b>Praline (to camera)</b>	If you want to get anything done in this country you've got to complain until you're blue in the mouth.
<b>Shopkeeper</b>	Sorry guv, we're right out of parrots.

*Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just the Words.* (1982) London: Mandarin Paperbacks.

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**For Gavin**

## SUMMARY

This thesis assesses the diachronic development of the semantic field 'Death' in English, focusing on synonyms for *death* and *die*. It begins with a discussion of the structuralist approach to meaning, from which developed the theory that the vocabulary of a language is structured by semantic fields which cover the conceptual areas belonging to the speakers of that language. A vocabulary is also a system, comprised of elements which might be related in any of a variety of ways. A change in one of the elements will affect those elements most closely related to it. The types of change undergone by any section of the vocabulary are discussed, with particular reference to the operation of change in areas perceived to be taboo and, specifically, in the language surrounding the concept 'death'. Special attention is given to the ways in which metaphor has been utilised through time to discuss death, and particularly to the operation of euphemism and dysphemism, dominant forces in this area of the vocabulary.

This thesis holds that language is not only a system with inbuilt strategies for change, but also a social phenomenon, conditioned by our perception of the world. It includes, therefore, a discussion of the history of perceptions of death in the west for the period in which English has been spoken, in order to assess the extent to which correlations can be found between changing perceptions of death and changes in the language with which it has been discussed.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is my aim in this thesis to assess the development of the semantic field 'Death' in English, and suggest reasons for particular changes which have taken place within it. This investigation will, necessarily, be limited in a number of ways. For example, I will look only at synonyms for 'death' and 'die' in detail and trace the historical development of only three lexical items from the field. It is believed, however, that many of the observations made throughout will be applicable not only to the entire semantic field 'Death', but to any field of the vocabulary. Factors which differentiate this particular semantic field from any other will also form a part of the study. The field 'Death', like all semantic fields, has its own unique structure owing to the perception of death as an entity different from every other, as well as the apparent randomness with which the elements of any field will interact.

I chose the semantic field 'Death' for a number of reasons, some of which were simply practical. For example, the material comprising the field had already been classified by the *Historical Thesaurus*<sup>1</sup>, currently in production. The field is relatively small and self-contained, by which I mean that there is little overlapping of the meanings within it with those of other fields<sup>2</sup>. Another factor which prompted the choice of this field was that it covers a conceptual area which is felt to be interesting for the following reasons. The concept 'death' is relatively abstract and we can therefore assume that the language used to discuss it will be shaped more by psychological factors than that surrounding a more concrete concept. Moreover, the emotions surrounding this concept are extremely complex, perhaps more so than those aroused by any other single concept. Finally, it is widely believed (see ch. 4) that attitudes towards death altered throughout and since the medieval period. The complex and changing perception of death, I hope to show, is to some extent

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<sup>1</sup>*The Historical Thesaurus of English*. Research project in preparation, Department of English Language, University of Glasgow.

<sup>2</sup>A reason for the 'self-contained' nature of the field is suggested on p.120.

reflected in the language.

This thesis is based largely on material extrapolated from the *Oxford English Dictionary (O.E.D)* and the *Historical Thesaurus of English (Historical Thesaurus)*. The following section is intended as a brief introduction to the *Historical Thesaurus*, the production of which is in progress in the English Language Department of the University of Glasgow, under the directorship of Christian Kay. The *Historical Thesaurus*, initiated in 1964 by Professor Michael Samuels and now nearing completion, is the first historical thesaurus to be compiled for any language, and will include almost the entire vocabulary of English throughout its history. It treats comprehensively, not only contemporary English words, but also obsolete words and obsolete meanings of current words, thereby enabling the study of a particular area of the language through time.

The classification of words in the Thesaurus is based on three major divisions: (I) The World (which includes the semantic field 'Death'); (II) The Mind, covering man's mental activities; and (III) Society, which deals with social structures and artefacts. Within these major divisions the material is arranged in hierarchical categories, each consisting of a defining heading followed by chronological lists of all the words, along with their dates of currency, which have ever been used as synonyms or near synonyms for the definition. It utilises in its classification system structuralist linguistic theory, discussed in chapter 1, displaying the different ways in which meanings of words are connected.

The diagram on p.xi provides a basic guide to the classification system of the *Historical Thesaurus* and indicates the position within it of the semantic field 'Death', a sample of which is included. The numbers correspond to semantic relationships, e.g. *the grim reaper* (subgroup 03) is perceived to be less general in meaning than *deadness* (subgroup 01), but the meaning of both is 'included' in the meaning of *death*, which is therefore assigned a group number as

opposed to a subgroup number. The semantic relationship of 'inclusion' is known as **hyponymy**, defined by Lyons (1977:291) as:

...the relation which holds between a more specific, or subordinate, lexeme and a more general, or superordinate, lexeme, as exemplified by such pairs as 'cow': 'animal', 'rose': 'flower',...

<u>Number</u>	<u>Heading</u>	<u>Lexical Items</u>	<u>Explanatory Comments</u>
01	The External World		
0102	Life		
010202	Death	<i>death</i> , etc.	Contains 130 synonyms for the noun <i>death</i> , including dates of use.
010202/01	state/condition of	<i>deadness</i> , etc.	Subgroup of 010202 (nouns) which is most general in meaning.
010202/03	personified/as an agent	<i>the grim reaper</i> etc.	Subgroup of 010202, more specific in meaning than 010202/01 'state/condition of'.
010202	Die	<i>die</i> , etc.	Contains 206 synonyms for the verb <i>die</i> .
010202/02	be dying	<i>have one foot in the grave</i> etc.	Subgroup of 010202 (verbs).
01020201	Dead	<i>dead</i> , etc	Contains 80. synonyms for the adjective <i>dead</i> .
02	Mind		
03	Society		

Figure i.i

The methodology adopted in this thesis is as follows. We begin with a general discussion of the structuralist theory of meaning which provides the theoretical basis for the study. We will proceed to examine the operation and direction of semantic change, including metaphor and euphemism, within the semantic field 'Death'. This will be followed by a detailed examination of the metaphorical content of the field. We will then trace the history of three lexical items whose development is believed to illustrate features typical of the field. Finally, I will present a brief overview of the changes undergone by perceptions of death throughout the history of the English Language, and will assess the extent to which correlations can be found between the conceptual area 'death' and the semantic field used to discuss it. The relevance of material dealing with thought rather than language to this thesis lies in the fact that language is not only an interdependent system but also a social phenomenon, shaped not only by forces from within the language itself but also by the relationship of speakers to each other and to their world. For this reason, any robust theory of language should address the interaction of both intralinguistic and extralinguistic processes.

## Chapter 1

### STRUCTURAL LINGUISTICS

*A language is a system in which everything holds together*<sup>1</sup>

This first chapter provides a description of the structuralist approach to lexical meaning, and is intended to provide a theoretical foundation for our examination of the semantic field 'Death'. In it we trace the development of field theory, and describe the methodological approaches which have made its development possible.

Since Saussure (1960, first published 1931), the commonly held theory of meaning amongst linguists has been that the vocabulary of a language is a system in which the meaning of any single word, as an element of the system, is connected to the meanings of other words, and that any change in the meaning of a single word will have an impact of some kind on the meanings related to it. This realisation that the vocabulary of a language is a structured system has been a vital breakthrough in linguistics and has enabled linguists of the latter half of the 20th century to reach a fuller understanding of the life of a vocabulary.

Earlier theories of meaning tend to be atomistic; the word and its meaning were considered in isolation, rather than as part of a system. A notable example is the 'mechanistic' or 'descriptive' linguistics of Leonard Bloomfield (1935) in which lexical meaning is envisaged as a causal sequence whereby an utterance gives rise to activity of some kind in the mind of the hearer (1935:139):

We have defined the meaning of a linguistic form as the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response which it calls forth in the hearer.[...] Speaker's situation → speech → hearer's response.

---

<sup>1</sup>Meillet, Antoine. cit. Waldron (1967:96)

This highly empirical approach, whereby lexical meaning could be explained only through observation of speaker's choice of and hearer's response to language, has been widely criticised by structural linguists. Uriel Weinreich (1963:153), for example, objects to Bloomfield's 'misguided positivism' which entails that progress in the field of linguistics depends on scientific discoveries which may never be made. It would necessitate, for example, understanding the processes of the human brain in order to explain the processes of linguistic selection. His approach is certainly flawed in its failure to account for the connectedness of language, and, in particular, the ways in which meanings are related. His most significant contribution lies in his account of semantic change, described in chapter 2.

Saussure (1960) concentrated in his lectures on the grammatical and phonemic, rather than on the semantic structure of language, but clearly believed language to be structured at all levels, with each level having its own internal structure and the potential to affect the structure of the other levels. Writers such as Baldinger (1980), Lyons (1977, *Language and Linguistics*, 1981 and *Language, Meaning and Context*, 1981), Samuels (1972), Ullmann (1957, 1962), Waldron (1967), Weinreich (1963) and Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968), follow Saussure in viewing language as a system of related elements. Lyons (1977:231) provides the following explanation:

...every language is a unique relational structure, or system, and [...] the units which we identify, or postulate as theoretical constructs, in analysing the sentence of a particular language (sounds, words, meanings, etc.) derive their essence and their existence from their relationships with other units in the same language system. We cannot first identify the units and then, at a subsequent stage of the analysis enquire what combinatorial or other relations hold between them: we simultaneously identify both the units and their interrelations. Linguistic units are points in a system, or network, of relations; they are the terminals of these relations, and they have no prior and independent existence.



## Lexical meaning

The 'linguistic unit' of the vocabulary with which we are concerned in this thesis is the **lexeme** - the smallest unit in the structure which carries 'significant' or lexical meaning; *dying* is a lexeme, whereas *-ing*, which carries only grammatical meaning, is not a lexeme but a 'morpheme'. Saussure (1960:66) identified two elements which constitute the lexeme - the **signifié** (concept or 'mental object') and the **signifiant** (spoken word or 'acoustic image').

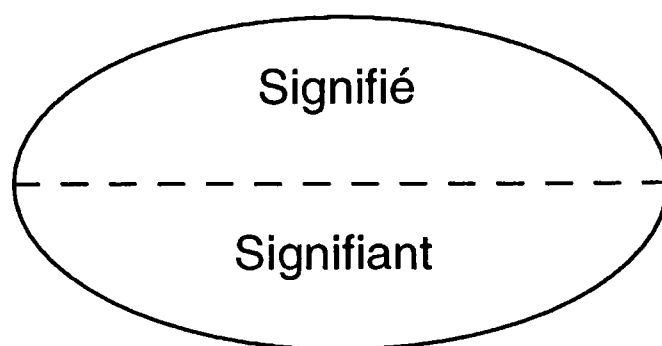


Figure 1.1 Saussure's model of the lexeme

Post-Saussurean writers, including Ullmann (1957, 1962) and Baldinger (1980), have been concerned with exploring the relationship between these elements of the lexeme. Baldinger, following Ullmann and Heger (1970) amongst others, envisaged the relationship between the elements of lexical meaning as analogous to that between the parts of a triangle, as described in figure 1.2. The dotted line in the diagram represents the absence of a direct relationship between the real world and the signifiant; the existence of the different languages of the world, despite the similarities of human experience, suggests that this is the case.

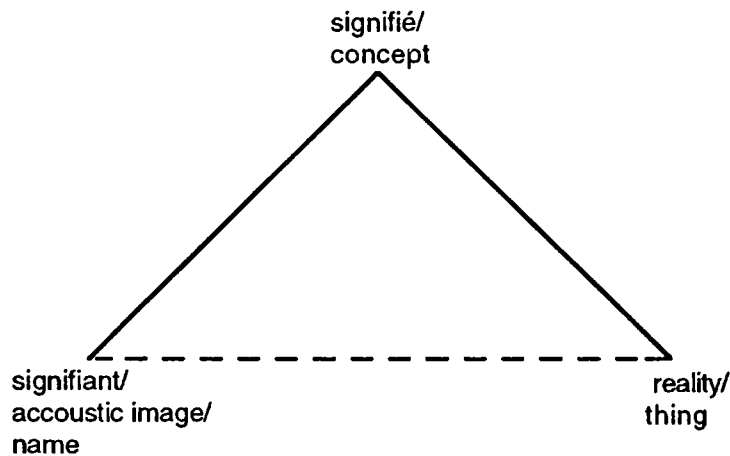


Figure 1.2 Ullmann's triangle

Waldron (1967:76-77) criticises contemporary semanticists for being over-cautious with regard to **hypostatization** or 'verbal realism' - the belief in the existence of abstract entities which are meanings of words forming a bond between words (or signifiants) and the things in reality that they name. According to him, the danger in denying the existence of hypostatization in language is that it can result in denial of much of what we can actually observe within language; we create linguistic categories, for example, in order to organize our experience of things in the world (1967:77):

It may still be asserted that individual lexical items function as elements in a generalizing or classifying system, whereby we assign portions and aspects of our experience to categories which are recognized by people who have learnt our language.

The existence of these categories, that of 'colours' for example, suggests that we perceive similarities between things in the world and the language we use to talk about them. But this is not to say that the relationship between language and the world is purely referential. There is a referential element to language, Waldron argues (1967:77), but it is only one type of relationship amongst the many and complex types which exist. For Waldron the link between the signifiant and the thing in the real world does not entail the existence of things

beyond language; the referential relationship is not to be understood simply as 'name to bearer-of-name', but as a more more complex connection, arising from the way in which we categorise the world. The language we use should not be taken as an indication of how things really are, but of how we perceive things to be, and our perception will often depend on cultural and environmental factors. He writes (1967:114):

...lexical meaning rests not upon a natural bond between word and sense, nor even (in any literal way) upon a convention or law, but upon something more indeterminate still - upon custom.

Baldinger was interested in **onomasiology** - that branch of semantics which starts from the concept or 'mental object' in the mind of the speaker to examine all the signifiants or 'designations' that the speaker might choose to express it. In this thesis we are dealing with the concepts of 'death' and 'dying' and the designations which have been used throughout the history of English to express these concepts. The designations can be understood as forming a 'field of designations' - a network in which the connections between the concept and all of its designations would be apparent, were it possible to make a study of the development of each lexeme in the field.

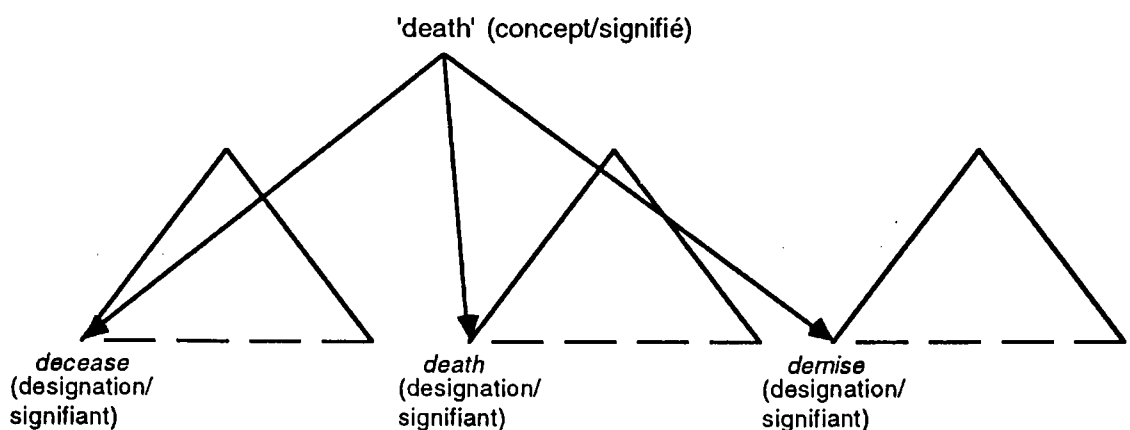


Figure 1.3 Part of the 'field of designations'

## Development of field theory

This thesis will examine the developments which have taken place in a single semantic field in English - that of 'Death' - but many of the observations will be relevant to the structure of a vocabulary in general. A central aspect of structuralist semantic theory is the recognition that the vocabulary of a language is comprised of **semantic fields** - a term thought to have been introduced by Ipsen (1924). A semantic field is a closely-knit section of the vocabulary, which lexicalizes and organises a particular conceptual area, for example, that of 'death and dying' with which we are particularly concerned here.

Field-theory - a development of post-Saussurean structuralist thought - was initially advanced most notably by the prominent German and Swiss scholars of the '20s and '30s, including Ipsen (1924), Porzig (1950) and Trier (1973). Trier's version is generally thought to be of greatest value although flawed in a number of ways. There now follows a brief review of Trier's approach and the revisions to it provided by succeeding writers, as a means of elucidating the development of modern field-theory. Trier's work has been evaluated by writers including Lyons (1977), and I will refer to his observations throughout this section.

Trier recognised that one of the major failings of traditional diachronic semantics was that it set out to catalogue the history of changes in the meanings of individual lexemes atomistically, instead of investigating changes in the whole structure of the vocabulary as it develops through time. He was aware that a change in the meaning of a single linguistic item has an effect on those items which are most closely related to it in meaning or form.

## **Diachronic/synchronic methodology**

During the 19th century, scholars in a variety of disciplines, including linguistics, started to make use of new methods inspired by Darwinian discoveries. Most at this time were interested only in evolutionary investigation which focused on historical or **diachronic** development. It came to be seen as necessary to supplement this method of linguistic study with an approach which would allow the elements in a language at a given point in time to be studied as a whole, that is, to supplement diachronic investigation with a **synchronic** perspective.

Saussure (1960) first distinguished between the diachronic and synchronic investigation of languages; two distinct but equally legitimate approaches to linguistic study. Lyons (1977:243) provides the following definition:

By the synchronic analysis of a language is meant the investigation of the language as it is, or was, at a certain time; by the diachronic analysis of a language is to be understood the study of changes in the language between two given points in time.

The interdependence of the two methods is apparent in the fact that diachronic linguistics presupposes and depends on synchronic linguistics, as Lyons (1977:252) observes:

...the notion of one language (e.g. English) existing over the centuries (from the time of Shakespeare to the present day, shall we say) is fallacious. What we have underlying the language-behaviour of people living at different periods are distinct language-systems; each of these systems can be studied, synchronically, independently of the other; and diachronic linguistics can investigate how an earlier system was transformed into a later system.

Trier (1973) recognised the need for a synchronic approach to semantic investigation, since the diachronic development of a vocabulary is comprised of successive systems of interrelated elements. He viewed the vocabulary of a language as an integrated system of lexemes (i.e. as a structure), interrelated in sense and in constant flux; so that not only do we find previously existing lexemes disappearing and new lexemes coming into being throughout the history of a language, but the relations of sense which hold between a given lexeme and a neighbouring lexeme in the system are constantly changing. Any broadening in the sense of one lexeme is seen to involve a corresponding narrowing in the sense of one or more of its neighbours.

Trier (1973) conducted a study into the conceptual field 'knowledge', as structured by the vocabulary of Middle High German, from the beginning to the end of the thirteenth century. The meaning of 'conceptual field' and 'lexical field' as envisaged by Trier is elucidated by Lyons (1977:254) as follows:

The set of lexemes in any one language-system which cover the conceptual area and, by means of the relations of sense which hold between them, give structure to it is a lexical field (Wortfeld); and each lexeme will cover a certain conceptual area, which may in turn be structured as a field by another set of lexemes (as the area covered by "red" in English is structured by "scarlet", "crimson", "vermillion", etc.). The sense of a lexeme is therefore a conceptual area within a conceptual field; and any conceptual area that is associated with a lexeme, as its sense, is a concept.

'Semantic field' is the more usual term for 'lexical field' today, and will, therefore, be used throughout this thesis.

Trier's method was to compare the structure of the semantic field 'knowledge' at time  $t^1$  with the structure of the semantic field

‘knowledge’ at time  $t^2$ . As Lyons (1977:243) suggests, strict application of the diachronic/synchronic distinction raises the following question: on what grounds can we say that the semantic field we would call ‘knowledge’ at one point in time is sufficiently similar to the semantic field called ‘knowledge’ at a different point in time to allow comparison? He provides the answer (1977:252):

They are comparable because, although they are different lexical fields (and necessarily so, since they belong to different synchronic language-systems), they cover the same conceptual field.

His aim was to show how the meaning of one lexical item in a **lexical set** (a subgroup of a semantic field, such as lexemes meaning ‘red’ in the field ‘colours’) is limited by the meaning of its neighbours and how a change of meaning in one lexeme automatically brings about certain changes in the meaning of other words in the set. In figure 1.4, the widening in the meaning of form *a* from ‘pq’ to ‘pqx’ from time  $t^1$  to  $t^2$  results in a corresponding narrowing in the meaning of *b* from ‘xy’ to ‘y’ from time  $t^3$  to  $t^4$ .

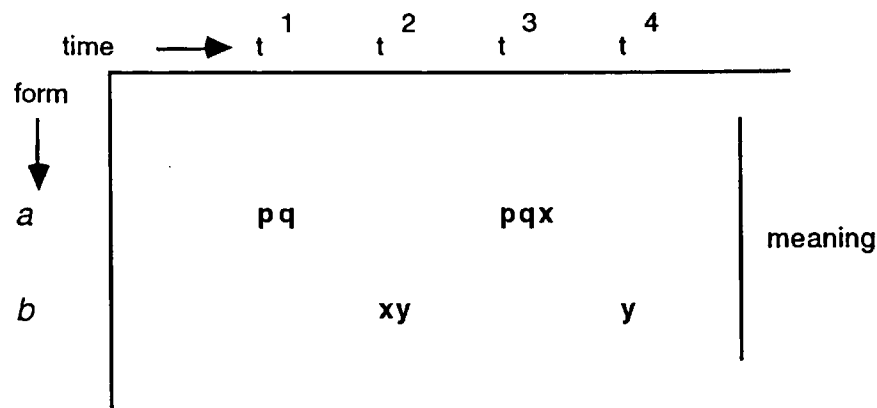


Figure 1. 4 Diachronic change

This recognition of the effect on neighbouring items of a change in a single lexeme and the central role of this relationship in semantic investigation was a considerable breakthrough, and paved the way for modern field-theory. There were, however, a number of flaws in

Trier's approach which have since been identified and resolved by other writers.

### **Paradigmatic/syntagmatic relations**

The main error in Trier's (1973) work on semantic fields is that he envisaged the vocabulary of a language as forming a complete semantic structure which covers an underlying conceptual area in which the meaning of one word delimits that of its neighbour without gaps and without overlapping; a view often referred to as the two-dimensional 'mosaic' metaphor. Overlaps of meaning are, by contrast, a constantly observable fact of language which make synonymy, partial synonymy and definition possible and provide redundancy in the vocabulary. If all the possible meanings of words and the boundaries between these meanings were established and unchanging in a vocabulary there would be no possibility, for example, of expressing a new idea. In a living language, however, the possibility of conveying new meanings is continually present, as new elements and new combinations are introduced and as new semantic uses are found for existing words. Modern field-theory recognises the role of semantic overlapping. In *Roget's Thesaurus* (1987), for example, a 'head-word' is followed by a range of words which are thought to share with it some element of meaning, and any single lexeme might appear in a number of different categories. For example, 'hope' as a head-word in the section entitled 'Emotion, religion and morality' is followed by *expectation*, *assumption*, *presumption*, and so on, but *hope* can also be found in the section 'Time' under the head-word 'futurity' and alongside *horoscope*, *crystal gazing*, *forecast*, etc.

Trier's (1973) 'two-dimensional' approach might also be described as **paradigmatic**. Saussure had recognised and contrasted paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations between units in a language-system. A paradigmatic relationship holds between a particular unit and those with which it can be substituted. Lyons (1977:241) writes:



... "old" is paradigmatically related with "young", "tall", etc., in expressions like "the old man", "the young man", "the tall man", etc., as "man" is paradigmatically related with "woman", "dog", etc., in expressions like "the old man", "the old woman", "the old dog", etc.

A paradigmatic approach, whereby the relationship between meanings of words in a language is envisaged as consisting only of corresponding widenings and narrowings, cannot do justice to the complexity of the relations that we can, in fact, observe between lexemes. There are many ways and degrees to which words may be similar or different in meaning. The multitude of relations which hold between elements of a vocabulary can most faithfully be represented by a thesaurus, which records, through a system of cross-referencing, the various ranges of lexemes with which each given lexeme has some element of meaning in common.

In contrast to Trier's (1973) theory, his contemporary W. Porzig (1950) developed a notion of semantic fields which was founded on the relationship of meaning that holds between pairs of syntagmatically connected lexemes. A syntagmatic relation holds between units combined with other units of the same level in the language structure. In the case of lexical meaning, this is the relationship between a given lexeme and those used alongside it, the study of which is sometimes known as the 'semantics of the phrase'. Lyons (1977:240):

... the lexeme "old" is syntagmatically related with the definite article "the" and the noun "man" in the expression "the old man";..

Modern field-theory, and its product the thesaurus, recognises that the structure of a vocabulary can be understood only when the syntagmatic, as well as the paradigmatic, relations between the elements are identified. A thesaurus incorporates syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations between words by including, not only those

words which might be substituted for a given lexeme, but also those with which it shares some element of meaning. For example, the section 'Death' in the *Historical Thesaurus* includes not only the synonyms for *death* - *decease*, *passing*, *demise*, and so on, but also nouns which, although not simply substitutable for *death*, such as *death-rattle*, share the concept of 'death' in their meaning. In the same section we can also find lexemes of all the other parts of speech which involve the concepts 'death', 'dying' and 'dead'. Trier, as we have seen, comprehended the need for a synchronic, as well as a diachronic viewpoint, but not for a syntagmatic, as well as a paradigmatic approach.

### **Across languages and time**

A further error on Trier's part was that he assumed that the vocabularies of all languages cover the same conceptual fields. This assumption raises questions about the relationship between language and reality; between the concepts to which the speakers of a particular language give expression, as opposed to those of which the speakers do, or might potentially conceive.

It is generally accepted by modern linguists that the vocabulary of a language is structured in ways that reflect the collective experience and perception of its speakers - a view which is supported by the widely observed discrepancies between the conceptual systems reflected in different languages. The fact that Eskimos have words for types of snow which differ in ways too subtle for inhabitants of warmer parts of the world to comprehend, is a commonly used example. We do not have in English an equivalent lexeme for each of these Eskimo words because we are unable, and have no need to, conceive of so many types of snow, so that, in this aspect at least, our conceptual system differs from that of Eskimos. In this example, the linguistic contrast arises due to an easily observable difference between the area inhabited by Eskimos and those normally inhabited by speakers of English, but there are many other differences between languages that arise from different perceptions of what appears to be

the same entity by speakers of these languages. Moreover, the so-called **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** (see also pp.104-105) holds that, not only is a language structured by the conceptual system of its speakers as we have seen from the example of Eskimo words for types of snow, but that the conceptual system is, at the same time, structured by language. This process, therefore, further differentiates the conceptual systems of speakers of different languages.

Trier (1973), then, was mistaken in his assumption that neat correlation in structure exists between vocabularies of different languages. His mistake teaches us that the vocabulary of a language should be viewed as independent of, but shaped by, the concepts which it structures, which are, in turn, independent, but representative, of the underlying 'reality'.

Similarly, the conceptual system of speakers of a single language might differ through time, so that a particular semantic field at  $t^1$  differs from the field at  $t^2$  in ways which suggest change in the perception of the underlying conceptual area. Lyons (1977:252, 4) observes that comparison of a field at times  $t^1$  and  $t^2$  is likely to reveal change in the 'internal structure' of that field - the way in which it is divided up by language. Chapter 4 discusses the development of perceptions of death in the west throughout the period of history covered by the English language, and we will find that death, although an ever-present feature of human history, has been perceived in ways which differ through time. It will be suggested in that chapter that some of the developments in the language used to discuss death have been motivated by developments in the perception of death itself.

In this thesis, which considers the language covering the conceptual field 'death' throughout its history, the diachronic approach will occasionally be supplemented by observations from a synchronic viewpoint, making possible analysis of the state of this section of the

vocabulary at different points in time. Lyons (1977:255) lists the linguistic developments which we might expect to find in such an investigation:

...we might find: (i) that there has been no change either in the set of lexemes belonging to the two fields or in their sense-relations; (ii) that one of the lexemes has been replaced with a new lexeme (or each of a subset of the lexemes has been replaced) without, however, any change in the internal structure of the conceptual field; (iii) that there has been no change in the set of lexemes, but there has been a change of some kind in the internal structure of the conceptual field; (iv) that one (or more) of the lexemes has been replaced and the internal structure of the conceptual field has also changed; (v) that one (or more) of the lexemes has been added or lost with (of necessity, if we discount for the moment the possibility of synonymy in the earlier or later system) some consequential change in the internal structure of the conceptual field.

This investigation, covering several centuries, allows us to observe changes such as these described in (iv) and (v): substitution of the items comprising the field and consequent change in the structure of the field. As for the developments described in (ii) and (iii) we can assume that these have occurred between relatively short intervals in time as part of the gradual but constant process of semantic change. The absence of change described in (i) is possible only in languages which have ceased to be spoken (see pp.23-24), since the recognition of two distinct language states necessarily involves intervening time between them in which semantic change will occur.

## Summary

1) Lexical meaning is to be understood in terms of the relation of a particular lexeme to other elements of the vocabulary system.

2) We have seen that from post-Saussurean structuralist thought has

developed an understanding of the principles involved in the investigation of a vocabulary as a system of related elements.

3) A synchronic view of successive language states supplements a diachronic viewpoint in order to describe the language at particular points in time as well as the changes which have taken place between two points in time.

4) Syntagmatic relations between elements of the vocabulary structure combine with a paradigmatic approach, making possible an understanding of all the kinds of sense relations that can hold between lexemes.

5) Every language covers a unique conceptual system.

## **Chapter 2**

### **SEMANTIC CHANGE**

Chapter 1 considered the word and its meaning as part of the system of language. This chapter will consider what happens when a word changes its meaning and how this change effects other elements of the system. On the subject of studying change in language, Saussure wrote (1960:140):

What diachronic linguistics studies is not relations between co-existing terms of a language-state but relations between successive terms that are substituted for each other in time.

It is hoped that, in this thesis, we can combine the diachronic study of substitution with an approach which recognizes the structured, systematic nature of language.

#### **Principles of change**

A number of contemporary writers including Michael Samuels (1972) and Jeremy Smith (1996) have noted the correlations between the principles of linguistic change and those of biological evolution, and the advantages of using an evolutionary model to study linguistic change. Smith (1996:41) writes:

To describe linguistic change as evolutionary is, of course, in one way a metaphor, since the notion of evolution was first established in biology and has simply been transferred to linguistic study by analogy. However, it may be permissible to argue that historical linguistics is literally an evolutionary discipline, since the mechanisms of change with which the subject engages seem to work in evolutionary ways.

The 'mechanisms of change' will be described briefly in the following paragraph. A detailed account of their similarities with the

mechanisms of biological evolution is felt to be unnecessary here. Readers should bear in mind Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' principle, by which, through a series of biological mutations producing tiny changes between generations of a species, 'useful' characteristics - those which best equip the organism for the environment in which it lives - are preferred, while less useful ones are discarded.

Firstly, **variation**, the slight differences which exist between individuals in pronunciation and choice of form with which to express a meaning, is a vital feature within all living languages. Variation, in the pronunciation of a word for example, makes available alternatives - what Samuels calls (1972:9) the 'raw material of linguistic change' - which may or may not be selected by other speakers. If a particular innovation is selected by another speaker, linguistic change has taken place. Samuels (1972:10) writes:

As regards the step from variant to change, we may adopt, for the present, a simple formula: the variant is misunderstood as an acceptable form (or reinterpreted) by the hearer, and, when this has happened often enough and been subsequently imitated, it ceases to be merely part of parole (sporadic usage in the speech of individuals) and is accepted into langue (the language, either in abstract or as codified).

The distinction between **langue** and **parole**, roughly 'language' and 'speech', is that originally made by Saussure (1960:9):

... language [...] is not to be confused with human speech, of which it is only a definite part, though certainly an essential one. It is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty. Taken as a whole, speech is many-sided and heterogeneous; straddling several areas simultaneously - physical, physiological, and psychological - it belongs both to the individual and to society. [...] Language, on the contrary, is a

self-contained whole and a principle of classification.

Samuels observes that the selection or **actuation** of a form that results in linguistic change normally occurs due to the variant being 'misunderstood' by the hearer 'as an acceptable form', but, I would argue, it is not necessarily the case that the 'imitating' speaker is mistakenly or accidentally using the form in its new meaning. This is especially notable in the case of speakers who form a sub-culture of some sort, for example the group formed by teenage speakers, who regularly select forms for use in functions which deviate from their 'normal' functions in order to signal their social differentness.

The variant form, once selected for use by another speaker, will become structurally significant, that is, part of the language system, if it is **implemented** by the speech-community. Finally, **diffusion** of the form outside the speech-community may or may not take place. This is the account of linguistic change which will be adhered to throughout this thesis. Smith (1996:44) writes:

Since Weinreich et al. (1968), three stages in the operation of linguistic change have been generally distinguished by linguists: actuation, implementation and diffusion. [...] a slightly modified version of this categorisation is adopted here: the *potential for change*, the *triggering and implementation of change*, the *diffusion of change*. The potential for change exists in the particular linguistic choices made by particular language-users at a particular time; such choices may be compared with the constant process of biological mutation; it is constantly taking place, for it exists in the perpetual ebb and flow of linguistic variation. When linguists refer to linguistic change, they tend to refer to implementation and diffusion, that is, the systemic development.

Diachronic investigation is, of course, concerned with change. Ullmann (1957:171) writes:



Synchronistic [synchronic] semantics is the science of meaning, diachronistic [diachronic] semantics the science of changes of meaning. The former revolves round the semantic relationship, simple or multiple; the latter is concerned with semantic change.

The recognition of the vocabulary as an interrelated system of elements has enabled linguists to understand semantic change as a process involving not only the individual lexeme but also those most closely related to it formally, semantically and sometimes phonologically<sup>1</sup>. But the initial step towards an understanding of semantic change is to explain the process by which a single form comes to be used to mean something different than formerly. Leonard Bloomfield (1933:430) attempted to explain the process in terms of **shift**, defined by him as follows:

When we find a form used at one time in a meaning A and at a later time in a meaning B, what we see is evidently the result of at least two shifts, namely, an expansion of the form from use in situations of type A to use in situations of a wider type A-B, and then a partial obsolescence by which the form ceases to be used in situations which approximate the old type A, so that finally the form is used only in situations of type B.

Bloomfield's account, although limited by the writer's empirical approach (see also pp.1-2), improved upon earlier theories like that of Herman Paul (1888) by adding to the notion of expansion of meaning, the notion of the encroachment of rival forms and

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<sup>1</sup> Phonological change is outside the scope of this thesis. The following examples, however, provided by Allan (1991:23) illustrate the impact of the taboo meaning of *cock* on meanings which sound similar:

There has also been an effect on words containing *cock*: for example, former Mayor Ed *Koch* of New York City gives his surname a spelling pronunciation /koʧ/ which rhymes with *Scotch*; the family of Louisa May *Alcott* (author of *Little Women*) changed their name from *Alcox*; *cockroach* is often foreclipped to *roach* in American...

simultaneous yielding of ultimately unsuccessful forms in the process of semantic change; an early recognition of the fact that change cannot occur without consequent disturbance in the system.

Stephen Ullmann (1957:199-249) moves closer to structuralist principles, insisting on the importance of 'association' - the connections which hold between groups of words either through form or through meaning - to semantic change, although he claims that the structural approach is appropriate only for his class of 'semantic changes due to linguistic innovation' and not for those due to 'linguistic conservatism'. The former category includes 'transfer of names' whereby a form is used to refer to something other than that which it formerly referred to based on a perceived similarity between the objects, and 'transfer of senses' whereby a form is used to refer to an object due to its similarity with the usual name of that object. His category of 'linguistic conservatism' (1957:209) consists of changes in the relationship between a word and its referent due to changes in the world, known as 'shift' by later writers including Waldron. He provides the following examples of words which have undergone change of this sort (1957:209):

...'book' before and after printing; 'artillery' and its terminology before and after the invention of gunpowder; 'plume' of goose-quill and 'plume' of steel, and so on.

Such changes should be, and are by contemporary linguists, perceived as structural since they affect related elements within the vocabulary system. By continuing to use the form *book* for the printed volumes of the modern age, the alternatives which might be used, for example, *publication*, *volume*, etc. are selected for use less often, and forms which might potentially be used to mean 'book', if the form *book* was unable to fulfil this function, occupy some other slot in the semantic structure.

R.A. Waldron (1967) discusses Ullmann's (1957, 1962) theory of

semantic change, and his own is to some extent a reaction against the neat categorization attempted by Ullmann. He writes, for example (1967:115):

...symmetry and elegance appear to have been constant preoccupations of those who have proposed schemes of semantic change!

Waldron perceives lexical meaning, and change of meaning, in terms of linguistic categories whereby the individual word functions as an element in the classificatory system which we construct through language. We construct this system by assigning aspects of our experience to categories shared by concepts which we perceive to be similar, and we use this classificatory system to structure our language. The category of 'colour words', (p.4), which is common to all languages, illustrates the fact that we perceive colours as having an element in common (that is, 'colour') and the language that we use to talk about colours as forming a sub-set within the vocabulary.

Semantic change, defined by Waldron (1967:114) as 'change in a word's criteria of reference' occurs when there is alteration of some kind in the system of categories. Transfer for Waldron corresponds to Ullmann's (1957) 'transfer of names' in 'changes due to linguistic innovation'. In a passage in which he criticises Ullmann's 'linguistic conservatism/innovation' division, he writes (1967:140):

If we thus rigorously define a change of meaning as a change in the word's criteria of reference we shall find ourselves contemplating two major types: modification of an existing linguistic category (which I call Shift) and change to a different category (or Transfer).

Waldron correctly regards Ullmann's (1957, 1962) 'transfer of senses' category, which includes ellipsis and folk-etymology, as changes of form rather than of meaning. He follows Ullmann, however, in retaining metaphoric and metonymic transfer as the other

types of semantic change along with shift. Transfer will be discussed together with metaphor below (pp.29-35)<sup>2</sup>.

‘Shift’, which corresponds to a change due to ‘linguistic conservatism’ in Ullmann’s (1957) system, is defined by Waldron thus (1957:142):

...the type of sense development in which a marginal change occurs among the criteria of a lexical category.

He provides, by way of example, the development of the word *sophisticated*. The meaning or ‘reference-category’ of this word had altered since the beginning of the century by the 1960’s, shedding its former negative associations and incorporating the positive ones which it has today. A contemporary example can be seen in the development of *sad*. The central meaning of ‘sorrowful, mournful’ appears to have been supplanted in the speech of many young people by ‘dull, boring’. A person described as *sad* in this latter meaning may be perfectly happy, so that statements like “She’s really sad, but she seems quite happy”, have become logical. It remains to be seen whether this shift will become structurally significant since *sad* continues to be used by the majority of speakers in its ‘sorrowful’ meaning. Waldron comments that many shifts are motivated by limited understanding of a word’s meaning on the part of young people, leading to slightly inaccurate application of that word. Whilst this is undoubtedly true, failure to discern the common meaning of a word and consequent inaccurate application of that word is something of which even highly experienced speakers are sometimes guilty.

According to Samuels (1972:52), the principal process of linguistic change, present at every level of language, is **extension**, defined by him as follows:

...any process by which the use of a form is extended to a

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<sup>2</sup> Since metonymy is felt to have little relevance to this study it will not be discussed here.

larger number of meanings or grammatical functions than it has hitherto possessed, its information-value being thereby reduced.

This account contributes two important dimensions to our description of semantic change. Firstly, it is not simply that a particular form is used to mean 'B' where it was once used to mean 'A', (as both the names 'shift' and 'transfer' suggest), but that it can be used to mean 'B' as well as 'A' for a period of time and either or both meanings might survive. Secondly, both meanings 'A' and 'B' will be affected by the fact that one form can now be used to mean either one of them, thereby lowering the information-content of the form: a situation which often results in ambiguity.

## Conditions for change

The question of why words change their meaning has been widely discussed by writers including, notably, Waldron (1967) and Samuels (1972). Waldron cites 'semantic vagueness' as the underlying condition for many shifts (1957:145):

Until quite recently, vagueness in language was regarded as a purely negative characteristic, however, it being taken for granted universally that precision was the goal and aim of all discourse; it is perhaps only since the dissemination of the philosophy of Wittgenstein that vagueness has been accepted as an inevitable, and indeed useful, feature of language, enabling us not only to speak when we cannot, or do not wish to, commit ourselves to precise lines of definition, but also to adapt traditional categories to changes in circumstances or changes in thought.

'Semantic vagueness' or the **variational space** surrounding the meanings of words, has, therefore come to be recognized as a vital feature of any living language. All living languages are constantly in a state of change; a language which has ceased to be used - a dead

language - naturally ceases to change. The meanings of its words and the boundaries between meanings have become fixed so that it no longer makes sense to speak of variational space surrounding them. Smith (1996:44) writes:

Variation is possible because individual linguistic items occupy fairly broad slots in the langue within which they are situated, and their realisations in parole can therefore vary quite widely. [...(1996:46)...] it is a proven fact that words mean different things in different contexts, and therefore have a fairly broad variational space.

It is, therefore, the variational space surrounding a meaning of a word which enables development of that meaning; within it lie all the potential applications or realisations of the form it surrounds.

Change tends to occur in the direction of functional improvement; a form, or elements of a form, which is more suitable for the function for which it is used will tend to succeed. This means that, on the one hand, languages tend towards a state of equilibrium in which all the elements are in stable relation to one another - a situation only actually achieved in the case of dead languages. The factor which prevents this happening in living languages is change produced by **contact** with other varieties of language. Smith (1996: 48) writes:

Contact is a crucial factor in linguistic change because no language or variety of language exists in a vacuum. Speech-communities come into contact with other speech-communities in all sorts of situations, and the subsequent interaction between these communities causes linguistic change.

Contact will be discussed in more detail below (pp.42-43, 86-93).

Waldron (1967:124) distinguishes four types of semantic vagueness, summarised as follows. There are cases of deliberate **generality** concerning a word's meaning - a useful feature of language since it is often neither desirable nor possible to be precise. Generality can be a factor leading to shift, widening the linguistic category to include

what were formerly associative criteria, or **narrowing** it to disclude what were formerly particularizing criteria. An example of generality leading to shift provided by Waldron, is that of the word *bad* (1957:148) which is related to OE *bæddel* ('hermaphrodite') and *bædling* ('effeminate person') and is thought to have meant 'imperfect, undeveloped in growth', clearly a narrower meaning than that commonly used today.

Almost all shifts involve generalization or narrowing, also known as 'specialization'. Typically, words develop narrower meanings through being used in restricted contexts, and words originally restricted in application broaden their meanings when they pass into less specialized registers. Waldron stresses the importance of context to semantic development (1957:149):

...as far as specialization is concerned, we have a tendency to bring contextual clues to bear on the interpretation of words in discourse; we thus, as interpreters, determine to varying extents the precise application of a word from the circumstances of its use. Now, if in our experience as individual speakers, a word like this is always associated with the same context or the same situation, with perhaps only slight variations, and provided we hardly ever hear the word used in radically different circumstances, we shall come to accept the familiar determining factors (which we began by deducing from the context) as constituents of the word's meaning.

A particular area of specialization, very significant in the semantic field 'Death', is the process by which words which were originally euphemistic become increasingly specific and, since they are concerned with taboo concepts, come to be perceived as indelicate (see also p.84). Samuels writes (1972:150):

A general word is chosen deliberately in preference to a more particular one; in time the context of use forces a narrower meaning upon it and as this occurs people avoid using it in its

more general sense, for reasons of delicacy.

This is the chief reason for the commonly noted phenomenon whereby a euphemism becomes inadequate for the function it is required to perform and is consequently replaced by a new euphemism. Samuels (1972:54) writes:

...as soon as the euphemism is no longer recognised as such by other speakers, it has undergone extension to include that referent in its meaning; a new euphemism is then required (e.g. *toilet, bathroom*), and so the cycle is endlessly repeated.

**Variation** amongst individual speakers as to the precise meaning of a word results in widening of its linguistic category to incorporate differences in usage and consequently to polysemy and shift. This is a very common feature in evaluative language, which depends for its meaning on cultural as well as individual value systems which can often conflict. For example, it is interesting to note a more recent development in the meaning of *bad* than that mentioned by Waldron above (p.25). It appears that, amongst certain young, chiefly U.S. speakers, *bad* has recently undergone amelioration, reflecting the values - physical toughness, lack of humility and respect for established authority - which have come to be prized in that sub-culture. This development reveals a value system different from that of the dominant culture in which *bad* is exclusively negative in meaning.

Waldron claims that there will almost always be a degree of **indeterminacy** about the meanings of words, since no decision was ever taken on the precise limits of many words and there is often no dividing line in nature between the things to which we refer. He might have said that there is always a degree of indeterminacy, since, even after the definition of a word has been 'fixed' by a lexicographer, there will still be a degree of indeterminacy regarding the application of the word amongst different speakers and in different situations.



Waldron writes (1957:146) that **ambiguity**, although a type of semantic vagueness, is a cause of transfer rather than shift. When a form is used in two ambiguous meanings, one of those meanings will tend to become obsolete, thereby creating an 'empty slot' - a meaning in need of a name. **Empty slots** are possible only in theory as Samuels (1972:65) reminds us:

'Empty slots' never exist literally, since circumlocution in lexis and marked forms in grammar are always available. But the degree to which circumlocutions are tolerated is limited, so that the ultimate effect is the same as if empty slots actually existed.

The process by which an empty slot 'attracts' a form is called by Samuels (1972:65) **functional pull**. The need to avoid empty slots in the vocabulary will often encourage the process of extension in an existing word. Otherwise they are filled through the process of lexical intake or innovation (1972:61), either **extrasystemic** or **intrasystemic**. Extrasystemic changes are those which originate outside the particular system of language in which they occur. At the level of the vocabulary the principal example of this is the borrowing of loanwords. Intrasystemic changes, those which arise within the system, include derivation and compounding. Samuels (1972:7) writes:

...intrasystemic factors [are] those that operate within a single linguistic system, [...]; and extrasystemic factors are those that influence a system from outside it as a result of contact with another system...

Intake and innovation are also considered to be the 'raw-material' of change because, although there tends to be a greater degree of motivation in the origin of these forms than in the case of extensions, they exist as variants since many of them never become part of the vocabulary system.

We have noted the distinction between extrasystemic and intrasystemic factors that give rise to change. Another useful distinction in diachronic linguistics is the wider one which can be made between **extralinguistic** factors - those which are external to language - and **intralinguistic** (Samuels, 1972:2):

...they [intralinguistic changes] arise internally for no other reason than that language, as a tool in constant use is a) liable to constant fluctuation, and/or b) in need of constant 'repair' or 'renewal'.

The 'repair' or 'renewal' mentioned by Samuels is otherwise known as **systemic regulation** - a name which covers the mechanisms with which we strive to increase the efficiency and decrease the ambiguity of language. For example, in order to express a meaning for which more than one form is available, the speaker will often select the least ambiguous form - that which has the least number of available meanings. The avoidance of forms thought to be ambiguous is diffused, just as semantic extensions are diffused, by imitation, thereby reducing the use of ambiguous forms and increasing the use of less ambiguous forms in their place. There is, therefore, within the system of language, a continual process of extension and limitation of those extensions which are believed to impede the efficiency of language.

Similarly, there is no need in language for two or more words with exactly the same meaning. We will see in Chapter 3 that even amongst the supposed synonyms of the semantic field 'Death', we can either identify some difference between them in meaning or, in the case of obsolete words, confidently assume that a differentiating element which is no longer observable previously existed. This is a result of the process called by Samuels (1972:64) **differentiation**, which occurs when the meanings of two lexemes become sufficiently close, and by which some distinction arises between them.

There is, however, a need in the vocabulary for forms which can perform a similar, if not an identical, function. This is because the development of language is motivated not only by a desire for greater efficiency of expression, but also for variety and subtlety of expression; we like to have available alternative ways of expressing a single idea. We can, for example, distinguish within the synonyms for 'death' in use at one time, differences of register rendering them more or less appropriate for particular contexts. Samuels writes (1972:28):

The essential complement of the substance of communication [parole] is the system [langue]: this requires stability of functional units which are discrete in form yet overlap sufficiently in function to provide a margin of redundancy.

The **redundancy** mentioned by Samuels is a feature which contributes to the efficiency of language by allowing a degree of overlap between meanings, and also between sounds and grammatical functions. At its most effectual level, redundancy helps the hearer understand the speaker's intended message, whilst maintaining economy of effort on the part of the speaker.

## **Transfer and metaphor**

Semantic change involves not only shift, whereby the meaning of a form is altered in some way, but also **transfer** whereby a form is used to mean something different than formerly. Transfer is recognized by linguists as closely related to **metaphor** since both involve the extension of a form to a new meaning. This type of development is a central characteristic of the semantic field 'Death', since, as I will argue below, death is a difficult concept to comprehend and is often felt to be unpleasant to discuss. These difficulties encourage the process by which we discuss death using language which has been transferred from other areas of the vocabulary.

Waldron distinguished metaphoric from metonymic transfer. He follows Richards (1936) and Black (1962) in his conception of metaphor as based on a resemblance between what is normally designated by the word (vehicle) and what is designated by its metaphoric use (tenor). The resemblance here is that which holds between two linguistic categories rather than between things in reality.

Waldron perceives metaphorical categorization as an extension of normal linguistic activity in which exceptionally wide categories are used. This is particularly apparent in idiomatic metaphors like *pass away* meaning 'die', where the meaning of the form widened to incorporate the association of 'dying', now central to the meaning. He points to the vagueness of linguistic categories as a reason for the difficulty of distinguishing through time between metaphors and literal expressions. He also introduces the notion of 'sleeping' metaphors (as opposed to 'dead' or idiomatic metaphors) as a description of those which are on their way to becoming idiomatic, but for which speakers retain a slight sense of their metaphorical origin.

Samuels (1972:53) discusses the way in which extensions, including metaphor, become 'devalued' with use. By this process, the relationship between the form and its meaning becomes increasingly literal and decreasingly metaphorical with every instance of use.

Parallel to the devaluation of overstatements is that of metaphors. These, when first used, are expressive innovations, but later, when outworn, they supply little more than near-synonyms in a meaning already well supplied with forms, e.g. *ass* in the sense of 'fool'.

This process is accelerated in the area of euphemistic metaphors, discussed below, where the 'taboo' nature of the meaning ensures that any form used to designate that meaning becomes quickly associated

with it and consequently inappropriate for meanings which are not taboo.

Lakoff and Johnson (1981) continue the process by which linguists such as Black (1962) and Waldron (1967) have sought to clearly distinguish the common linguistic phenomenon of metaphor from its literary counterpart. They argue that we are unlikely to be aware of the great extent to which language is metaphorical because a great deal of the metaphor is so deeply embedded within it. They write (1981:3):

...metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

They show that, since our conceptual system is primarily metaphorical (we perceive one thing in terms of another), the language we use is structured by metaphor (we talk about one thing in terms of another). Metaphor, according to this account, arises when the concepts (or 'linguistic categories') involved are different, and when one of the concepts is partially structured in terms of the other. They write (1981:4):

To give some idea of what it could mean for a concept to be metaphorical and for such a concept to structure an everyday activity, let us start with the concept ARGUMENT IS WAR. This metaphor is reflected in our everyday language by a wide variety of expressions:

ARGUMENT IS WAR

Your claims are indefensible.

He attacked every weak point in my argument.

His criticisms were right on target.

In these everyday statements we can see that the language associated with the concept 'war' is used to talk about aspects of the experience of 'argument'. We structure language in this way because we

perceive the experience of arguing in terms of our understanding of 'war', involving, for example, an opponent against whom we must try to defend ourselves whilst trying to attack him/her, in order to win rather than lose.

Lakoff and Johnson identify three types of metaphor - **structural** (highly evident in the semantic field 'Death'), **orientational** and **ontological**. Structural metaphors are of the kind illustrated by ARGUMENT IS WAR, where one concept is partially structured in terms of another. A pervasive structural metaphor from 'Death' is DEATH IS A JOURNEY, seen in items like *departed* and *gone*. Orientational metaphors occur when we use our experience of our own bodies and their interaction with the world around us to structure a concept. Lakoff and Johnson (1981:15) provide the example HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN, based on our experience that happiness tends to correspond with a relatively upright position of the body, raised corners of the mouth, etc., seen in expressions such as:

...That *boosted* my spirits. My spirits *rose*. You're in *high* spirits. I'm feeling *down*. I'm *depressed*. He's really *low* these days....

An orientational metaphor relevant to the semantic field 'Death' might be called LIFE IS HERE; DEATH IS AWAY, seen in expressions such as:

He passed *away*. She is *no longer with us*. I'm afraid he's *gone*.

In forming ontological metaphors we use our experience of physical objects and substances (these things which are more clearly delineated in our minds) to talk about things which are less clearly delineated. A common type is the container metaphor where we view entities as containers that can contain other entities. Examples of this are (1981:32):

He's *in* love. He's coming *out of* the coma. ... He *entered* a state of euphoria.

The language surrounding 'death' suggests that, unlike most other states of the mind and body, it is not perceived by us as a container into which the individual can enter; not a single item in the semantic field involves this type of metaphor. We can only speculate on the reason for our refusal to conceive of death in this way, but it may stem from a basic denial that death possesses such 'container-like' properties, with ourselves the intended contents. To incorporate such a notion into our conceptual system would involve acceptance of the fact that death is continually possible for each of us; a notion which we must, for the most part, disregard in order to live happy lives. Another factor which renders the container metaphor inappropriate for conceiving of or talking about death, is that death, unlike sleep or a coma, is a state from which the individual can never emerge.

The similar but less anxiety-provoking metaphor of the body as container of life is occasionally used, seen in expressions such as:

She *gave up* the ghost<sup>3</sup>.

The rarity of such metaphors suggests that we prefer to avoid reference to a division between spirit and body - an idea which we naturally find frightening (see chapter 4). The vast majority of the items comprising the semantic field 'Death' preserve in metaphor the unity of spirit and body after death:

*He* passed on. *She's* gone to the other side. *He's* left us.

It has been noted above that the prevalence of metaphor in this field is

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<sup>3</sup> The final *OED* quote for *give up the ghost* meaning 'die' comes from 1879. The meaning appears to have changed to, simply, 'give up'.

due to the difficulty of discussing death, firstly, because it can never be understood as a subjective experience in life, and secondly, because it is often felt to be too sombre or distressing to discuss directly. We employ, therefore, a range of euphemistic metaphors to structure our discourse about death. We have seen that the language surrounding the concept 'death' employs different types of metaphor as well as language transferred from different areas of the vocabulary. These areas of the vocabulary used to talk about death form the 'metaphorical clusters' which comprise the semantic field 'Death'. A comprehensive breakdown of the field in terms of its metaphorical clusters appears in chapter 3 (pp.66-73).

Metaphor, then, is utilised widely in the semantic field 'Death', enabling discussion of a subject which arouses anxiety within us. The type of metaphor which is motivated by a desire to avoid direct reference to an unpleasant topic, is known as **euphemism**. The euphemistic extension enters another conceptual area covered by the language as in metaphor, but the area is selected, not only for its similarity with, but for the fact that it is perceived as 'better' than what it is used to denote. For example with the common DEATH IS A JOURNEY metaphor (see p.32), the concept 'journey' is selected not simply for the perceived similarities between 'dying' and 'going on a journey', but because going on a journey is deemed a nicer experience than dying.

It is hoped that we can produce in the following pages a description of the operation of euphemism - a process whose treatment in the literature has tended to be relatively unscientific. Writers (including Adams (1985), Allan and Burridge (1991), Andersson and Trudgill (1990), Ayto (1993), Burchfield (1985), Cobb (1985), Griffin (1985), Gross (1985), Hughes (1991), Noble (1982) and Partridge (1970, 1984)) have concentrated on the question of why euphemism arises, to the detriment of the equally important question of how euphemism develops and functions within the vocabulary. Both issues are addressed in the following pages of this thesis, beginning with the question of why we need euphemisms in the first place. The



discussion of euphemism will be followed by an enquiry into **dysphemism**, generally regarded as the opposite of euphemism, but which, I hope to demonstrate, is better understood as a closely related phenomenon. I will distinguish euphemism and dysphemism from both **neutral** language - that which lacks metaphorical connotations - and **taboo** language or 'swearing'.

<u>form</u>	<u>literal meaning</u>		
<i>dead</i>	'cessation of life'	neutral	
<i>no longer with us</i>	'absence/departure'	euphemistic	
<i>six feet under</i>	'investiture of body underground'	dysphemistic	<u>metaphorical</u>

Figure 2.1

Figure 2.1 provides examples of the three types of lexeme - neutral, euphemistic and dysphemistic - which we find in the semantic field 'Death'.

### Taboo and Euphemism

Euphemism proliferates in the **taboo** areas of the language and is often defined in terms of its relation to taboo; for example, Ayto (1993:1) defines euphemism as:

A euphemism is an avoidance term...[and]...the set of communicative strategies we have evolved to refer to a topic under a taboo, without actually contravening its terms.

The earlier, anthropological application of the term 'taboo' in English is provided by Spears (1981:ix) as follows:

"Taboo" is a Polynesian word for any of a number of religious prohibitions which forbid specified behavior usually under the threat of some kind of punishment. Many of the taboos of this type are absolute, that is, they are always in effect regardless of

the situation. Many of them involve offenses toward the spirit world and religious custom.

This understanding of the term has prompted writers including Gross (1985:203) to argue that there is no *real* taboo operating in western culture, by comparison with cultures in which, for example, it is forbidden to speak the name of a dead person and believed that one's own death will result from doing so. The travel writer Bruce Chatwin (1987:104) records an incident in central Australia in which a white man, having murdered four Aboriginal youths, is acquitted because none of the dozens of Aboriginal witnesses would testify against him :

'Aboriginal witnesses', he said, 'are not always easy to handle. They refuse, for example, to hear the dead man called by name.'  
'You mean they wouldn't testify?'  
'It makes the case for the prosecution difficult.'

There is, of course, no such strong taboo in our culture, but it is useful to apply the term to those areas of life which, for a variety of reasons, we find difficult to discuss directly. Those parts of our experience which have been or are seen as somehow unfit for direct reference include death and aspects of war, sex and genitalia, menstruation, pregnancy and excretion.

'Taboo', therefore, will be applied in this thesis to the widely accepted rules, imposed by society, by which we are constrained to some extent regarding the language used to refer to those subjects which cause general unease. They do not explicitly forbid particular types of language, but regulate our linguistic behaviour through conscious or unconscious rules present in our society. They are, therefore, vital elements in the structure and social life of our culture, allowing us to conceal those elements of our experience which we prefer to keep private, and maintain a level of verbal interaction with which we feel comfortable. It could be argued that the taboo surrounding death

allows us to live more successful and happy lives, without a constant awareness of our own inevitable death and that of others.

Diachronic study of the language relating to death in English reveals that euphemism has always been a major constituent of the field. Although outside the scope of this thesis, there is a great deal of evidence for a corresponding situation in different languages and in periods pre-dating the birth of English.

Gross (1985:203) reports the words of the philosopher Vladimir Jankèlèvitch, expressing a sentiment which is evident in the language of many cultures, past and present:

Is not the word death above all others the unpronounceable, unnameable, unspeakable monosyllable that the average man, conditioned to compromise, is obliged to shroud modestly in proper and respectable circumlocutions?

Griffin (1985:32-43) discusses euphemisms in ancient Greece and Rome, where the subject of death, perceived to be the greatest insult, was highly productive of evasive language. The metaphors behind the items cited by Griffin (1985:33-34) - FALLING, MIGRATING, DEPARTING, YIELDING TO NATURE, PAYING DEBTS, BREATHING OUT and FALLING ASLEEP are all present in English (see ch.3). This fact, revealing as it does a high level of continuity in the way in which death has been perceived by inhabitants of the western world, suggests a very basic need, surviving millenia of cultural change, to avoid direct reference to death.

Burchfield (1985:13-30) provides evidence to show that the Anglo-Saxons and their predecessors felt the desire to avoid 'sceandword' - 'bad' or 'inauspicious' words. This includes the history of *die* itself (see also pp.81-82). During the OE period, *swefan*, *sweltan* and *steorfan* (themselves thought to be euphemistic in origin) along with

the periphrasis *wesan dead*, were most commonly used to mean ‘die’, although it is widely believed that \**degan*, the predecessor of *die*, existed at least in early OE. The absence of \**degan*, cognate with ON *deyja*, from OE literature is almost certainly due to taboo and resulting avoidance. It appears in early ME literature in the form *degen*, either revived, or adopted from Norse.

Vernon Noble (c1982:56) alludes to the earliest known English euphemisms for death which appear in the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*. He provides the following examples<sup>4</sup>:

[annal] 100: In this year Simon the apostle was crucified, and John the evangelist *fell asleep* in Ephesus.

[annal] 101: In this year Pope Clement *passed away*.

[annal] 509: In this year St. Benedict the abbot, the father of all monks, *went to heaven*.

[annal] 798: In the same year the body of Wihtburh was found quite sound and free from corruption at Dereham, fifty-five years after she *departed this life*.

The metaphors involved in these - FALLING ASLEEP and DEPARTING/GOING ON A JOURNEY - are both euphemistic resource areas in PDE; the latter is particularly prevalent. There are a number of early Christian euphemisms for death in *Beowulf*, including the periphrasis (l.2469) *Godes leoht ceosan* [lit. ‘choose God’s light’]. Burchfield comments that it is difficult to ascertain to what extent, if at all, OE, and even more recent words, were euphemistic at the time of their use, due to insufficient contextual evidence. For example, the verb (*ge*)*cringan* (related to PDE *cringe*) ‘to fall in battle, to die’ may have been contextually euphemistic in OE, since it formerly meant ‘to curl up’, but it is difficult to ascertain when the change in meaning occurred. Ullmann (1957:212) writes:

The precise connotations carried by a word in past ages are often difficult to determine, and the more remote the age, the

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<sup>4</sup>The italics are mine.

more hazardous the operation becomes.

**Connotation**, incidentally, and **denotation**, are defined by Samuels (1972:52) as follows:

...common meanings (denotations) are accepted by all competent speakers of a language, individuals possess or develop new private links (connotations) between forms and their referents

Another question raised by Burchfield (1985:15-16) is whether forms such as *Godes leoht ceosan* can properly be regarded as euphemisms or simply as poetical variants. In this thesis, 'euphemism' is defined in the broad sense of any form which has undergone extension and is used to avoid explicit reference to a taboo topic, so poetical variants meeting this criterion are acceptable. However, these are not included in the field according to the *Historical Thesaurus* classification since they do not appear as single items in the relevant dictionaries (*O.E.D.* (1989) and the *Anglo Saxon Dictionary* (1898)).

The way in which euphemisms arise is by a similar process of lexical extension to that of metaphors. The difference lies in the relationship between the original conceptual area and that entered by extension. In the case of metaphorical extension the conceptual area entered is perceived as similar to, although recognized as different from, the original area. In the case of euphemistic extension the conceptual area entered is also perceived as 'better' than the original area. An example is the common DEATH IS A JOURNEY metaphor, seen, for instance, in *pass away*, whereby the concept of 'journey' is perceived as preferable to that of 'death' (p.34).

In the case of euphemism, the motivation behind the extension will tend to be the desire by the speaker to avoid tabooed words and use instead words with less unpleasant associations. A euphemism can, therefore, be perceived as a variant form selected for its 'weaker' or

less explicit semantic properties than those of the alternative forms available to the speaker. Samuels writes (1972:53):

In lexis, overstatement (exaggeration) could be regarded as corresponding to strong-stress phonological variation, and similarly understatement and euphemism would correspond to weak-stress phonological variation. The difference lies in the selection of discrete forms possessing "stronger" or "weaker" semantic (not phonetic) properties.

For example, once the euphemism *pass away* came to be implemented by the speech community it was selected in situations requiring indirect rather than direct reference to death. Regular use of a weaker form than that which is, in a sense, required, leads in time to a 'devaluation' of semantic content, whereby a form becomes more and more associated with the topic to which it is commonly used to refer and thereby loses its euphemistic content. Similarly, dysphemism, discussed below, is regarded by Samuels as akin to exaggeration - those variant forms selected for their 'stronger' semantic properties than those required for simple denotation. Regular implementation of a dysphemism can lead to a similar devaluation whereby the form loses its dysphemistic quality and the potential for replacement is created<sup>5</sup>.

We noted above (p.23) the impact that extension of a form to a new meaning has on both or all of its meanings, as Samuels (1972:52) observes:

The term 'extension' will be used here broadly, for any process by which the use of a form is extended to a larger number of meanings or grammatical functions than it has hitherto possessed, *its information-value being thereby reduced*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> An example of devaluation of a dysphemistic form might be a mother on a railway platform telling her daughter, "If you fall onto the track and kill yourself, I'll murder you!"

<sup>6</sup> The italics are mine.

In the case of extension to a euphemistic meaning, however, the tendency for the euphemism to rapidly become the central meaning of a form at the expense of an earlier meaning or meanings, limits ambiguity and enables the form to maintain a relatively high information-value. For example, Allan and Burridge (1991:23) write:

There is a wealth of evidence that where a language expression is ambiguous between a taboo sense and a non taboo sense its meaning will often narrow to the taboo sense alone.[...] The British still use *cock* to mean 'rooster'; however, because of the taboo homonym meaning 'penis', this sense of *cock* started to die out in American in the early nineteenth century; it is nowadays very rare in Australian.

We see numerous forms in the semantic field 'Death', extended from a previous, literal meaning to the taboo meanings related to dying, for example *demise*, which was, according to the *OED*<sup>7</sup>, first used by Shakespeare to mean:

**Conveyance or transfer of an estate by will or lease**

and in 1754:

**Transferred to the death or decease which occasions the demise of an estate, etc.; hence, popularly, = Decease, death.**

This demonstrates extension based on what Taylor (1995) calls the 'co-occurrence of domains'. We can assume that the form *demise* would habitually occur in the context of legal discussions denoting the transfer of property after the death of the owner, so that *demise* would come to be associated with the event of death. The regular co-

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<sup>7</sup> All the following dictionary definitions and quotations are taken from the *OED*.

occurrence of the 'domains', or conceptual areas, of 'transfer of property' and 'death' would eventually enable *demise* to be used to denote 'death' without 'transfer of property', since, once a form is extended to refer to a taboo concept, its literal denotation is unlikely to survive. The reason for this is that a shift occurs in the literal meaning whereby it comes to include associations of the extended meaning and is no longer capable of simple denotation. The extension of *gay* to mean 'homosexual' has, for example, resulted in, or at least hastened the obsolescence of the earlier 'lively and happy' meaning.

We also see within the field 'Death' examples of forms borrowed from other languages in their extended meanings and sometimes also in their literal meaning, so that extension of the form has not taken place within the English vocabulary system but prior to its entering the system. Of *decease*, a French loanword first recorded in c1330, the *OED* writes:

**In its origin [decease is] a euphemism and still slightly euphemistic or at least less harsh and realistic than death;...**

The 'euphemistic origin' of the form in English is due to its adoption from French. It may have been a euphemism in French prior to adoption and borrowed as such. On the other hand, it is possible that *decease* was perceived and used as a euphemism largely because it had entered the language from French, as opposed to some other language, due to the prestige of the French nation and language during this period (see pp.86-93). Of course, many of the words borrowed from French at this time were non-euphemistic, but were perceived nonetheless as relatively sophisticated due to their French provenance. In the taboo domain of 'death', the desire for such 'semantically weaker', less explicit forms of expression, is particularly strong.

*Expire*, it would appear, was borrowed in both its literal and its euphemistic meanings. Also a French loanword, it was first used in



English in 1400, according to the *OED*, to mean 'die' and then in 1590 to mean 'breathe out'. The editor comments that the former (apparently earlier) meaning is a special use of the latter (apparently later) meaning. It is unlikely, given the substantial difference between the dates, that this is simply a case of failure to find or record a given meaning until after it has been transferred. It is more likely in this case that the word was borrowed twice from French in the two distinct meanings which it possessed in that language (one literal and one euphemistic). Otherwise, it may have possessed only one (literal) meaning in French but was attributed euphemistic connotations on its initial borrowing into English.

We have seen that euphemism arises through extension, but that we can distinguish between intrasystemic and extrasystemic euphemistic extensions in 'Death' as in other areas of the vocabulary. *Demise*, transferred in English to a euphemistic meaning, is an example of intrasystemic development. *Decease* and *expire*, borrowed from French in their euphemistic meanings, are both examples of extrasystemic development. A less significant way in which euphemisms are created intrasystemically is by analogy on existing forms, as appears to be the case with *pass away* based on the pre-existing *pass* meaning 'die' (see p.97-99).

## Dysphemism

Dysphemistic, as well as euphemistic, language surrounds taboo areas. Allan and Burridge (1991:26) define it as follows:

A dysphemism is an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotation or to the audience, or both, and it is substituted for a neutral or euphemistic expression for just that reason.

A dysphemism, for example *snuff it* meaning 'die', is, like a euphemism, an extended form used to refer to something regarded as taboo. Dysphemisms, however, do not 'prettify' taboo topics as

euphemisms do; they tend rather to emphasise their vulgar or amusing aspects, and achieve this by drawing the extended forms from domains which are perceived as vulgar rather than elevated. With the original domains of metaphors for 'death' there appears to be a continuum from 'physical' to 'spiritual' whereby we can say that dysphemisms tend to be more 'physical' and less 'spiritual' and euphemisms are more 'spiritual' and less 'physical'. For example, the DEATH IS A JOURNEY euphemism (*pass on*) finds correlation between the act of moving from one place to another and either the ascension of the spirit from the body or the absence of the deceased from the world of the living. The concepts utilised as dysphemisms are, by contrast, often concerned with the physical events peripherally associated with death, for example DEATH IS RESIDENCE UNDERGROUND (*push up the daisies, six feet under*), DEATH IS NAKEDNESS (*pop one's clogs*) and DEATH IS THE DEATH RATTLE (*croak*).

All metaphorical extension requires a degree of creativity for its actuation, since there needs to be a perception of two things as similar, which are in fact, different - a link which is often exploited for humorous effect in the case of dysphemisms. Our present century has been a particularly fruitful time for new dysphemistic expressions for 'death', a point which is discussed in chapter 3 (pp.78-80). Many of these appear to parody euphemistic expressions, for example, *buy the farm*, *get one's wings* and *join the choir invisible*. Allan and Burridge (1991:26) discuss this category thus:

The following terms for menstruation are hardly euphemisms, on the other hand they are not unquestionable dysphemisms either: *have the curse*, *woman's complaint*, *be feeling that way*, *off the roof*, and so on. We therefore dub them dysphemistic euphemisms for some occasions (and straight dysphemisms on others, such as when a man is whinging about the sexual unreceptiveness of his female partner).[...]With dysphemistic euphemisms, the locution [form] is dysphemistic, but the illocution [message] is not.

Many of the highly metaphorical dysphemisms and occasionally the euphemisms we use, might also be described as **extravagant usages**. By this I mean that they never come to be part of the vocabulary structure, but are used, perhaps widely, for a relatively short period of time before becoming obsolete. These often either originate from or are propagated by the media, particularly in the present day. A number of these were supplied by the survey (see ch.3), for example, *fillet one's fish* meaning 'die', but will not be discussed further in this thesis due to their lack of structural significance.

Dysphemism arises through a similar process of extension to euphemism; a form which commonly denotes a concept from one domain is selected to refer to a concept in another domain, based on a perceived similarity between the two. It falls, however, into Samuels' category of overstatement or exaggeration (1972:52) mentioned above (p.40):

In lexis, overstatement (exaggeration) could be regarded as corresponding to strong-stress phonological variation, and similarly understatement and euphemism would correspond to weak-stress phonological variation. The difference lies in the selection of discrete forms possessing "stronger" or "weaker" semantic (not phonetic) properties.

In the case of dysphemistic extension, the domain is selected, not because it is perceived as being 'better' than the concept in question, but because it is perceived as similar to some unpleasant aspect of it. *Croak*, for example, was extended to mean 'die' based on the similarity between the sound 'croak' and the death rattle. It was first recorded in c1460 with the meaning

**To groan or cry (of persons).**

In 1812 the meaning 'die' was first recorded in a dictionary of the time: the meaning of *croak* had been extended to an action (dying) which involves the making of the sound 'croak'. Its new function was

to express the concept 'die' in a way which is stylistically low and perhaps humorous, i.e. which has 'stronger semantic properties' than those required for simple denotation.

Dysphemisms can also develop as a result of the pejorative semantic change of euphemisms; lexemes which were formerly euphemistic can become dysphemistic through habitual use. This development is difficult to trace, however, due to the problem of ascertaining to what extent the form was euphemistic in the first place. The popular *kick the bucket* might be an example of this. The *bucket* element is defined by the *OED* as:

**A beam or yoke on which anything may be hung or carried [perhaps adopted from OF *buquet*...]**

During the 16th century, when the word was used in this meaning, it was common practice to hang pigs by the heels from the 'bucket' after having cut their throats. *Kick the bucket* was, therefore, a metaphorical form for 'die', referring literally to the death throes of a pig. It may have begun life as a euphemism and come, through time, to be the dysphemism we know today. It may, however, have been originally dysphemistic, since the death throes of a slaughtered pig seem an unlikely resource area for euphemism, even for our relatively rustic ancestors.

It is held in this thesis that dysphemism, like euphemism, performs the useful function of allowing us to avoid explicit reference to taboo topics. It tends to be seen by writers, however, as the opposite of euphemism, referring directly to the concept in question. Hughes, for example, remarks (1991:10) that taboo subjects 'paradoxically encourage an opposite verbal reaction' (or dysphemism) and that this is a 'startlingly direct and shocking violation of a taboo'. Enright (1985: 2) discusses:

...euphemisms and their opposites, dysphemisms..[which are]  
the making of things sound worse than they are...

Adams (1985: 46), in his criticism of the over-use of euphemistic language, sees dysphemism as an antidote to the 'suppression or evasion and therefore untruth that is the root act of euphemism' and, therefore, as explicit. He writes:

Because euphemism, which is an effort to make something sound specially nice, implies that unless prettified it will be specially unacceptable, a euphemistic formation can easily turn into its opposite. That would be a 'dysphemism', a coinage almost as ugly as what it describes.

Gross (1985), Partridge (1970, 1984) and Spears (1981) use the label 'slang euphemism' for dysphemism, a more accurate description since it recognizes the euphemistic nature of dysphemism. 'Dysphemism' is preferred to 'slang euphemism' however, since the form *slang* is used widely with a variety of meanings.

Allan and Burridge (1991) provide the most comprehensive account of dysphemism but, similarly, they claim (1991:26) that 'a dysphemism is used for precisely the opposite reason that a euphemism is used'. Their account is based on the view that verbal exchanges are governed by concerns about 'face' otherwise called 'self-respect'. They can be either 'face-saving' or 'face-losing' exercises; the speaker chooses a euphemism in order to maintain his/her own face and that of the hearer, and a dysphemism in order to defend his own face and threaten that of the hearer. 'Dysphemism' seems to be used here simply as synonymous with 'language regarded as offensive', for example (1991:7):

Compare some of the possible responses to the offer 'Do you want to come for a meal tonight?'

1. No, I don't
2. I'm sorry, I don't
- 3 I'm sorry, (I'd love to but) I can't.

Refusals and denials of any sort are potentially hazardous to

face and either of the first two responses can be used to hurt or offend (i.e. *be dysphemistic to*<sup>8</sup>) the offerer...

Such a wide definition of dysphemism is not terribly useful, although it might be improved by the inclusion of some notion of degree. The 'taboo' refusal 1, for example, might be seen as mildly dysphemistic, since refusing a dinner invitation without explanation is only mildly taboo, whereas a doctor telling a patient that (s)he is about to *kick the bucket* would be highly dysphemistic, since irreverence towards the imminent death of another person is extremely taboo.

I hope to show in the following pages, however, that dysphemism is better seen as a phenomenon closely related to euphemism and used in particular situations for a particular effect, than as the opposite of euphemism. The 'directness' which commentators cite is more apparent than real, since dysphemisms allow speaker and hearer to avoid unpleasant topics just as euphemisms do, although by different means. We have at our disposal a variety of ways to talk about those aspects of our life which cause unease, but both euphemism and dysphemism allow us to make them seem other than what they really are.

We might compare *pass away* and *snuff it*, both commonly used to mean 'die', in the following sentences:

1a)'My brother **passed away** yesterday.'

1b)'My brother **snuffed it** yesterday.'

2a)'Did you know that someone **snuffed it** in this cellar 20 years ago?'

2b)'Did you know that someone **passed away** in this cellar twenty years ago?'

Both the euphemism *passed away* and the dysphemism *snuffed it* seem

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<sup>8</sup> My italics

appropriate in the 'a' sentences but not in the 'b' sentences. The reason for this is that the sentences differ in **tenor**, defined by Wales (1989:456) thus:

Tenor involves the relationships between participants in the situation, their roles and status.

In sentences 1a) and 1b) 'my brother' implies a close relationship between speaker and situation, and justifies the use of 'gentle', euphemistic language and not the seemingly harsh language of 1b). 'Someone' and 'twenty years ago' in sentences 2a) and 2b) imply distance between the speaker and the situation, so the euphemistic *passed away* seems unnecessarily indirect. It is often implied, for example by Adams (1985), Enright (1985) and Hughes (1991), that euphemism is inherently appropriate for discussing taboo subjects whilst dysphemism is inherently inappropriate, but we can see that the appropriateness of both dysphemism and euphemism depends heavily on the context in which the words are spoken<sup>9</sup>.

An example of a situation in which euphemisms for death are often regarded as 'offensively indirect' is in the speech of politicians concerning the death of servicemen in military conflict. During the Gulf War, the U.S. Government used the term *collateral damage* to refer to dead soldiers and, during the Falklands War, *soft-skinned targets* was used to designate the enemy. The avoidance of explicit reference to death in these cases, motivated as it is by political considerations, offends those who feel that such deaths should be fully recognized.

Allan and Burridge (1991) stress the importance of context to descriptions of language as either euphemistic or dysphemistic. They argue, however, that it is fair to say that there are many lexical items that are, in 'normal' circumstances, always either euphemistic or

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<sup>9</sup> The extended context should also be taken into account, e.g. 2a) would clearly be inappropriate if addressed to someone who has recently been bereaved.

dysphemistic, since, as competent speakers of English, we are able to designate many lexical items one or the other depending on whether or not they would be appropriate in an imagined situation (1991:21):

...it would ignore reality to pretend that ordinary people do not speak as if some expressions are intrinsically euphemistic - for instance, *loo* is euphemistic, whereas *shithouse* is not. What seems to be meant by this is that, in order to be polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment, one would normally be expected to use the euphemism rather than its dispreferred counterpart(s). When we describe some expression as a euphemism, without reference to the context of its use, this is what we have in mind.

This set of criteria, or 'appropriateness test' for euphemism will be used throughout this thesis to assist the designation of lexical items as euphemistic, often with little contextual information. Similarly, an 'inappropriateness test' can be devised as the criterion for dysphemism, as follows:

The item(s) one should not choose if one wants to be polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment.

Of course, it will sometimes be the case that the speaker will intend to offend the hearer(s), and in this case the item in question should be selected. Nevertheless, when dysphemisms are felt by either or both speaker and hearer to be offensive, the inappropriateness test has been failed. An appropriateness test should also be possible for dysphemisms if, as I wish to argue, they are appropriate in certain situations. This might be:

The item(s) one should choose if one wants to discuss a taboo topic at a basic or humorous level with (a) hearer(s) one believes will not take offence.



The assertion that the dysphemistic form *snuffed it* is appropriate in sentence 2a) might appear to be a denial of the existence of a taboo surrounding death, since the speakers apparently break the rules of the taboo without guilt or condemnation. Readers are reminded, however, that 'taboo' is understood in this thesis, not as an absolute prohibition, but as a complex, subtle and general set of rules (pp.35-36), and that language regarding taboo subjects may be inappropriate in some situations but not in others; we are constrained by the facts of the situation in which discourse takes place.

Gross (1985:209) imagines a conversation between two people concerning a casual acquaintance who has died in which they use the form *kick the bucket* to describe the event. This is not a 'startlingly direct and shocking violation of a taboo', as Hughes (1991:10) would have it; it is simply that, in the words of E.M. Forster, the speakers have 'invested their emotions elsewhere' (Gross, 1985:210). The speakers are not, we can assume, closely emotionally attached to the deceased, and are not overheard by anyone who is, so that there is no personal or social pressure to be euphemistic. By using *kick the bucket*, no serious thoughts of mortality are evinced and the conversation can progress without solemnity to other topics. Dysphemism has, therefore, allowed the speakers to discuss death and at the same time evade the awful reality of death; that is, it is a euphemistic strategy.

We can conclude that dysphemism shares with euphemism the following characteristics:

**Function:** the dysphemism acts as an evasive tool, used to refer to taboo subjects.

**Intention:** use of dysphemism allows the speaker to evade the central element(s) of the topic to which (s)he refers.

**Effect:** the hearer is made aware that no serious, direct

reference to the topic is being made and is therefore unlikely to consider the topic in its harsh reality

The ways in which dysphemism differs from euphemism are as follows:

**Contextual appropriateness:** the contexts in which the two can be used as evasive tools differ. As we saw in the examples above, the solemnness of death can, in some situations, be avoided by the use of dysphemism, whereas in others the same form will be regarded as highly offensive. Similarly, euphemism can help to avoid explicit reference to death, but can in certain contexts seem inappropriately, even offensively, indirect.

**Intention:** dysphemism tends to be used in order to provoke humour regarding the taboo topic.

**Effect:** the hearer is likely to understand that the reference to death is evasive and also jocular. The effect of hearing a dysphemism may, in fact, be less shocking than that of a euphemism, since we are accustomed to connect euphemism with events which upset us and dysphemism with events from which we are further removed.

In summary, dysphemism is a euphemistic device whereby direct reference to a topic perceived as taboo is avoided through use of a form, made available through extension, which directly refers to a peripheral, unpleasant aspect of the concept in question, and to the central concept only metaphorically. The domain from which the form is extended tends to be a physical event associated with the concept, and this focus on the physical, slightly ridiculous aspects of the topic gives dysphemism its 'vulgar' and often humorous effect. Dysphemisms seem harsher than their euphemistic alternatives because they employ concepts which are themselves unpleasant, such as 'being underground' in *push up the daisies*; but, in doing so, the

central concept is avoided, as is the case with euphemism. The imaginative effort involved in the creation of many of these dysphemisms highlights the desire of the speaker to be evasive and the ability of the hearer(s) to understand him/her in this way.

## **Taboo and ‘swearing’**

There is a third category of language which proliferates around taboo areas, although not in the area of ‘death’ in PDE, which will be called in this thesis ‘taboo’ language, but which might be recognized as the set of ‘swear words’. Taboo words are those lexemes perceived to refer too directly to a taboo topic for polite use. Like euphemism and dysphemism, they originate in metaphorical extension, but a shift occurred at some point in their history due to the word being increasingly associated with the taboo topic to which it has been used to refer. The shift narrows the meaning of the form and renders it ‘inappropriate’ almost independent of context, since the form itself has become taboo. Samuels (1972) might say that these lexemes have the ‘strongest semantic properties’ of all (see p.40), and this, of course, tends to be the motive behind their use. There is an overlap between taboo and dysphemistic language - taboo language is dysphemistic in effect and dysphemism refers ‘coarsely’ to taboo subjects - and, perhaps for this reason, some writers, including Allan and Burridge (1991), Andersson and Trudgill (1990), and Burchfield (1985), fail to distinguish between them. It is useful to maintain a distinction, however, since the considerable narrowing undergone by taboo language allows it to be perceived as differing in degree from, i.e. semantically ‘stronger’ than, dysphemistic language in most cases. We might compare:

a) He didn’t **fuck** her until their wedding night.

b) He didn’t **get his leg over** until their wedding night.

Both *fuck* and *get one’s leg over* refer ‘inappropriately’ to the taboo sexual act, but any competent speaker of English would agree that sentence b) would be appropriate in many more situations than

sentence a).

Once tabooed, the word itself comes to be regarded as, not only referring directly to a topic under taboo, but as inherently taboo itself. An early example of widespread avoidance and replacement of a word regarded as inauspicious is that of the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European word *\*rksos*, meaning 'bear', replaced by the ancestor of PDE *bear*, which, at the time of its adoption, meant 'brown one'. A similar replacement took place in all the Germanic and Slavonic languages - those spoken in the areas in which the bear is known to have been at large centuries ago. Hughes (1991:8) makes the following interesting suggestion:

Given the totemistic aura of the animal amongst the Germanic peoples, it is a possibility that the heroic name Beowulf, literally 'bee-wolf', might be a coded reference to bear.

Lehmann (1962:206), commenting on the process by which the euphemisms replacing these tabooed words, lose their metaphorical connotations through time and come to refer directly to the concept, comments:

When members of a society consider it essential to use a circumlocution for a tabooed term, it may change entirely to the new meaning. 'Bear' is scarcely 'the brown one' for any speaker of English today.

In the case of *bear*, the process of continual replacement by euphemisms of lexemes which have lost their euphemistic quality (see also p.40) does not occur. This may be due to the fact that the adoption of *bear* coincided with the process of the extinction of the animal in northern Europe, an event which naturally rendered it less fearsome, and its name less likely to become taboo.

I mentioned above that, although 'swear' words proliferate around the

main taboo areas (particularly sex and excretion), they are entirely absent from the field 'Death'. I wish to argue in this thesis (see also ch. 4) that the development of the language used to discuss death has been affected, to some extent, by the anxiety aroused by death itself; an anxiety which is stronger than that aroused by any other of the taboo areas (Becker, 1973:9):

...the fear of death is indeed a universal in the human condition. To be sure, primitives often celebrate death [...] *because* they believe that death is the ultimate promotion [...]. Most modern Westerners have trouble believing this any more, which is what makes the fear of death so prominent a part of our psychological make-up.

Perhaps the depth of our fear of death, concealed for the most part by euphemistic or dysphemistic language, prevents the development of the most explicit type of language in this area.

Hughes (1991:24) writes:

Our ignorance about the origins of several of the major swear-words is one aspect of the problem of suppressed or buried evidence. However, an analysis in terms of origin is revealing. It gives the lie to the popular misconception (which is perpetuated even in academic circles) that the "four- letter words" are exclusively Anglo-Saxon in origin.

While it is true that the terms 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'four-letter word' are in danger of being indiscriminately applied to swear words in an attempt to justify their use in the face of opposition, there are a few, including *shit*, *turd* and *arse* which are certainly Anglo-Saxon in origin. The origins of one of the semantically 'strongest' words in English - *fuck* - are unfortunately uncertain. It may be connected to Latin *pugnare* 'to fight'. Alternative theories are suggested by Hughes (1991:27):

Eric Partridge [...] in his lively etymological dictionary *Origins* (1977) makes much of the relationship between Latin *futere* (the root of French *foutre* ["to fuck"]) and Latin *battutere*, "to strike". The curious forms *windfucker* (for *windhover*) and Scots *fucksail* (for *foresail*) suggest yet another potential root in ON *fukja* "to drive", in this case "to be driven by the wind".[...] In English alone we can see [...] the link [...] in the slang terms for sexual intercourse *bang*, *knock* and the recently fashionable *bonk*.

Once tabooed, a form, or at least the form used in its taboo meaning, may become obsolete, but, as Lehmann (1962: 206) writes:

...words are more commonly restricted through taboo to certain contexts than led to extinction.

This is no doubt because, as I have argued, we need to be able to choose from a range of alternatives, the form that will best suit not only our precise meaning but also the context of our utterance. Despite the taboo surrounding death, we do not want always to be gentle and respectful when discussing death - the human mind requires greater variety of expression than this.

An important factor leading to the 'tabooing' of words in English was the post-Conquest influence of French. The contact between the two languages, as is well known, led to the influx of French forms into English, resulting in a large number of (near-)synonyms; there were 50 synonyms for 'die' in use between 1200 and 1400, according to the *Historical Thesaurus*. This thesis views the influence of one language upon another in terms of systems in contact; the system of the English vocabulary receives new elements from that of the French vocabulary and attempts to regulate itself in order to cope with the impact. Samuels (1972:65) describes the systemic regulation resulting from contact thus:

Language possesses no pure synonyms, and this fact is not likely to be accidental. As Bréal remarked (1897)... 'the memory does not willingly burden itself with two mechanisms working concurrently towards one and the same end'. If, for extralinguistic reasons such as cultural borrowing or foreign conquest, two exact synonyms exist for a time in the spoken chain, either one of them will become less and less selected and eventually discarded, or a difference of meaning, connotation, nuance or register will arise to distinguish them.

The relative cultural sophistication of the French in the post-Conquest period, combined with the fact that France was the conquering nation and imposed its nobility upon the English, meant that the French language and the words adopted from it were perceived to be more sophisticated than the native alternatives and tended to occupy the higher registers of English. Therefore, as suggested by Samuels (1972), some potential synonyms, in this case those coming from French, tended to be differentiated from native synonyms through their occupation of a higher register. This comparative sophistication was, no doubt, the motive behind their selection over English alternatives, particularly during the 13th century, by which time English speakers used French words to signal their social standing.

A complementary and simultaneous process of differentiation took place in that the meaning of many native words became narrower and more explicit in order to survive. The French forms were perceived as relatively prestigious not only because they had been adopted from French but also because they tended to be used with relatively 'wide' meanings, corresponding with a process of narrowing in English words. There was, therefore, differentiation in two directions simultaneously, at least in those areas of the language where vagueness or delicacy might be required.

This process of differentiation through narrowing enabled many

native words to survive French impact, which otherwise might have been, as Samuels writes, "less and less selected and eventually discarded" (see p.57), by producing meanings fit for different functions. The result was a host of lexemes with comparatively explicit meanings without the sophistication of the French alternatives. As we have seen (p.53), narrowing tends to result, in taboo areas, in the lexemes in question coming to be seen as referring too directly to unpleasant subjects, and therefore becoming linguistically tabooed.

The imposition of a linguistic taboo will be a result of extralinguistic events, such as the subject in question, for some reason, coming to be seen as more anxiety-provoking, as must have been the case at some time in history with words meaning 'bear' (see p.54). The Victorian period is, of course, most notable for the placing of taboos on words in the modern era (see also ch.4), and, consequently, during this period, a large number of new euphemistic and dysphemistic expressions for discussing death appeared. It could indeed be argued that the language of death underwent a process of **overlexicalization** during this period, a term referring to the presence in a language of an abundance of synonyms for a particular concept, the substance of which, nevertheless, tends not to be satisfactorily addressed. During the 19th century the *Historical Thesaurus* records 31 new forms synonymous with *die*, compared to 17 in the 18th century and 13 in the 20th century.

The proliferation of words for 'death' should not, however, be taken to indicate that the Victorians were more comfortable with the idea of death than either their predecessors or successors. As Wales (1989:331) comments:

Overlexicalization occurs in a language when a particular concept or a set of concepts are of vital concern to a culture.

This concern manifests itself, not only in the amount of literature dealing with death, but also in the sentimentality with which death



tends to be treated, as well as in extralinguistic developments such as the adoption of the wearing of black clothes for mourners and the inception of the undertaking profession.

A taboo on a particular linguistic item might be lifted by a releasing mechanism of some kind, allowing the word to be used more freely. Burchfield writes (1985:26):

...wave after wave of social prudery at times drove the more explicit terms into retreat, while other social mechanisms brought them back in use and also generated hard-core words.

It has been argued, e.g. by Gorer (1965:171), that the first half of the twentieth century witnessed the creation of what he calls 'the pornography of death', whereby the language surrounding death became very heavily tabooed. The second half of this century, however, has seen a breaking down of the taboo whereby death is more easily and freely discussed in western culture (see ch.4). This linguistic development corresponds with changing attitudes towards death as discussed by contemporary anthropologists (for example, Gittings (1984, 1992), Cannadine (1981) and McManners (1981)). These changes have enabled words which would formerly have been judged taboo to be used in a wider variety of contexts.

## Neutral language

We have considered so far the categories of euphemistic, dysphemistic and taboo language. There is a final category used to discuss taboo topics, called **neutral** language in this thesis, which lacks the metaphorical content of euphemism and dysphemism. The 'core' words of the semantic field 'Death' - *death*, *dead* and *die* - fall into this category. The effect of using neutral, like euphemistic and dysphemistic, language, depends on the context in which it is spoken. It might, in certain situations, have a more dramatic effect on the hearer than dysphemism, commonly believed to be the most shocking.

Consider, for example, sentence 2a) above (p.48):

2a)'Did you know that someone **snuffed it** in this cellar 20 years ago?'

The speaker, free from pressure to be euphemistic, could use either neutral or dysphemistic language. (S)he uses the dysphemistic *snuff it*, we can assume, in order to create some kind of effect, probably humorous or dramatic. As competent speakers of English, we know that this is not a word which we are expected to take seriously; it is used to elicit emotions very different from those that would accompany the intimation that the death of a loved one, for example, had occurred. Perhaps the speaker avoids using language which is direct, such as *die*, precisely because it is this 'neutral' language, devoid of metaphor, which most openly confronts the reality of the anxiety-provoking subject of death.

## Summary

- 1) This chapter viewed semantic change in terms of lexical extension.
- 2) We discussed the principles - actuation, implementation and diffusion - which are present in all types of change.
- 3) We identified metaphorical transfer as the principal type of change in the semantic field 'Death' and distinguished euphemistic transfer from the closely related phenomenon of dysphemistic transfer.
- 4) We have seen that the taboo surrounding death is a major cause of change in this field, giving rise to metaphorical language with which it might be discussed.

## Chapter 3

### ANALYSIS OF FIELD

This chapter will consider the theory put forward in the preceding chapters as it pertains specifically to the semantic field 'Death'. The material falls into two sections as follows:

**Part 1:** A breakdown of the field in terms of the metaphorical clusters (see p.34) used to discuss death.

**Part 2:** A detailed study of three central lexemes - *starve*, *decease* and *pass away*.

#### **Part 1: Metaphor in the field 'Death'**

##### **Preliminaries**

The field, as classified by the *Historical Thesaurus*, will not be reproduced and examined in its entirety due to restrictions of space. I believe, in any case, that the omitted sections are of little relevance to this study; the items contained within them, for example *death-rattle* and *death-rate*, depend chiefly for their formation on the central elements of the field listed below. I have, however, included a number of items, not in the *Thesaurus* classification, which I collected myself. I decided to undertake this task as I became aware that a number of items in common use today were missing from the field, a situation which will no doubt be addressed both before the completion of, and in following supplements of, the *Historical Thesaurus*. My method for a relatively quick and effective way of finding this information was to produce a survey (reproduced in the appendix (pp.102-103)), and distribute it amongst the first-year students of English Language at Glasgow University in 1995, a class which contained approximately 300 students, around 10% of whom were mature students, as well as relatives and acquaintances of all ages and regional and social backgrounds. As a result, once again, of restrictions of time and space in the writing of this thesis, the

implications of the survey results cannot be explored in full. I have, however, kept the information and it may prove useful for further work in this area.

The response, particularly in the area of verbs meaning 'die' was excellent; in many cases the same items were provided repeatedly by participants of different ages and from different backgrounds. I accepted only those items which were given repeatedly (at least three times) in order to avoid accepting as significant an item which existed only in the idiolect of an individual. Items gathered by means of the survey are marked 's'.

My methodology for the first part of this chapter will be as follows. I will look firstly at all of the nouns meaning 'death' followed by all of the verbs meaning 'die' recorded by the *Historical Thesaurus* and my survey. I will begin by identifying the metaphor utilised in the meaning of each of the items, except those designated 'neutral' which are believed to have no metaphorical content. I will then designate each of the items believed to have metaphorical content either 'euphemistic' or 'dysphemistic' and compare the results from each of the word-classes in the year 1400 with those of the year 1950 with the intention of demonstrating that this area of the language has developed from predominantly euphemistic to predominantly dysphemistic. Finally, I will comment on the significance and continuity or lack of continuity of each of the metaphors used in the noun and the verb classes.

There are a number of problems involved in such a study, both inherently and due to the restrictions of my methodology, which should be identified before commencing. Firstly, it is often difficult to discern the connotations with which obsolete words, or words having undergone semantic change, were used, as Ullmann (1957:212) writes (see also pp.38-39):

The precise connotations carried by a word in past ages are

often difficult to determine, and the more remote the age, the more hazardous the operation becomes.

This makes the tasks of deciding whether a lexeme has or has not undergone metaphorical extension and of designating lexemes 'euphemistic' or 'dysphemistic' more problematic. The difficulty of 'pinning down' the precise meaning of a word, never mind its connotations, is ultimately due to the fact that the categories or slots of meaning occupied by words, including the variational space surrounding each lexeme which contains all of its potential changes (see also pp 23-24), have 'fuzzy' boundaries and are constantly changing. Given the fuzziness of meanings of words themselves, it would be foolish to hope for complete precision in a study of these meanings. The difficulty of separating the 'euphemistic' from the 'dysphemistic' items is also due to the euphemistic nature of dysphemisms and the ease with which euphemisms can become dysphemistic (see p.40).

I am restricted in a number of ways by my methodology which is in turn restricted by the limited time and space permitted in the writing of this thesis. In order to identify metaphors which are not transparent, I have depended on dictionary evidence about the etymology and prior meanings of the word, occasionally resorting to native-speaker intuition. To designate lexemes 'euphemistic' or 'dysphemistic', I used a combination of factors. Firstly, I considered the conceptual area employed by the metaphor; whether or not it would be perceived as sufficiently 'better' than death to perform a euphemistic function (see p.39). I looked at the *OED* quotations for every item, together with any editorial comments supplied. I also considered Allan and Burridge's (1991) formula (p.50), combined with comments made by the participants in the survey and, where appropriate, my own experience of the language.

As regards the study of the proportion of euphemisms and of dysphemisms at different points in time, it might be the case that the dependence chiefly upon written record might bias the results in

favour of euphemism for the medieval period and dysphemism for the modern period. We should, therefore, be aware that the literature of the two periods differed widely in quantity and range. The relatively small body of literature of the 15th century was dominated by religious material and romances, whereas by the 1950s, a vast range of genres and styles existed and almost anything deemed worthy could be written and published. This does not mean, however, that the results of the comparison are insignificant. Various types of literature did exist in 1400 (the first year chosen for our study): not long before this date Chaucer had incorporated a host of 'vulgar' and humorous expressions into his poetry. Also, I would argue that the literature of any period does reflect the spoken language, at least the standard variety if one exists, to a considerable extent. We should not necessarily assume that the language was more like Present Day English than the evidence suggests.

In the light of these comments, however, it will not surprise the reader to find that the results in columns three and four are not intended to be conclusive. They are, however, as accurate as the methodology, limited by time and space, would allow, and provide a true, if general, description of the field.

I begin in Table 3.1 with nouns meaning 'death', including those listed under the sub-heading 'general loss of life', felt to be very closely related in meaning to, and perhaps interchangeable with synonyms for *death*. There then follows an analysis of the results of the study. I continue in the same vein in table 3.4 with verbs meaning 'die'. The number in brackets beside each heading, for example '**Death (010202)**', is the number of that section in the *Historical Thesaurus*. The first two columns of the table - the forms and their dates of use - are extrapolated from the *Historical Thesaurus*. The forms are listed chronologically, apart from those forms occurring only in OE, which are listed alphabetically. In the third column I have tried to identify the metaphor employed in the meaning of the form in order to measure the significance and continuity of each.

In the fourth column I have designated the meanings of the forms neutral, euphemistic or dysphemistic on the basis of the metaphor used and the contextual information provided by the dictionary quotations. Some items are labelled ‘euph-neutral’ or ‘euph-dysphem’ when the meaning is thought to have developed from euphemistic to neutral or dysphemistic, and ‘euph/neutral’ or ‘euph/dysphem’ when the form is felt to be used in both ways during the same period.

### Key to abbreviations and conventions

Abbreviations consisting of two letters appearing next to dates of use are those used by the *Historical Thesaurus*, originally designated by the *OED*. They are as follows:

ai: archaic	na: nautical
au: Australian/Aboriginal	nz: New Zealand/Maori
cf: chiefly	rr: rare
cq: colloquial	sc: scots
dl: dialect	sl: slang
in: ironical	us: United States
li: literary	

The sign ‘-’ between two dates means that the word was in use between them. The same sign after a final date means that the word is in current use. The sign ‘+’ appears between two dates when they are separated by a period of over 150 years and the word was not in use during this period. Brackets around the final date means that there is reason to believe the word was used after that date.

**Table 3.1**

**Metaphor in nouns meaning ‘death’ (010202)**

<u>FORM</u>	<u>DATES OF USE</u>	<u>METAPHOR</u>	<u>NEUTRAL/ EUPHEMISM/ DYSPEMISM</u>
<i>bealusip</i>	OE	departure (of spec. (hateful) kind)	euphemism
<i>cwealm</i>	OE	destruction/violent death	euphemism/ neutral
<i>cwealmbealu</i>	OE	destruction/violent death	euphemism/ neutral
<i>deapes lip</i>	OE	cup of death	euphemism
<i>deapgedal</i>	OE	separation (of body and soul)	euphemism
<i>deaplicnes</i>	OE	mortality	euphemism
<i>deapscua</i>	OE	shadow of death	euphemism
<i>deapscufa</i>	OE	shadow of death	euphemism
<i>deapwege</i>	OE	cup of death	euphemism
<i>ealdorbealu</i>	OE	end (of life)	euphemism
<i>ealdorgedal</i>	OE	separation (from life)	euphemism
<i>ellorsip</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>ende</i>	OE	end	euphemism
<i>endedeap</i>	OE	end	euphemism
<i>endelif</i>	OE	end	euphemism
<i>endestaƿ</i>	OE	end	euphemism
<i>fær</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>feorhcwalu</i>	OE	end (of life)	euphemism
<i>feorhcwealm</i>	OE	end (of life)	euphemism
<i>feorhgedal</i>	OE	separation (from life)	euphemism
<i>feorhlegu</i>	OE	loss (of life)	euphemism
<i>ferhpweg</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>forpferednes</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>forpfering</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>forpfor</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>forpgeleorednes</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>forpsige</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>forpweg</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>fripgedal</i>	OE	separation (from life)	euphemism
<i>gastgedal</i>	OE	separation (from soul)	euphemism
<i>gehror</i>	OE	destruction/ruin	euphemism
<i>geonsip</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>hingang</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>hinsip</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>hryre</i>	OE	destruction/ruin	euphemism
<i>ladsip</i>	OE	departure (hateful)	euphemism
<i>geleor(ed)nes</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>lichryre</i>	OE	loss (of body)	euphemism
<i>lifgedal</i>	OE	separation (from life)	euphemism
<i>morpcwalu</i>	OE	violent death	euphemism/ neutral
<i>neosip</i>	OE	departure (of spec. kind)	euphemism



<i>niedfaru</i>	OE	journey (compulsory)	euphemism
<i>nydgedal</i>	OE	separation (compulsory)	euphemism
<i>sawolgedal</i>	OE	separation (from soul)	euphemism
<i>sip</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>swylt</i>	OE		neutral
<i>swyltdeap</i>	OE		neutral
<i>tofær</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>tolysnes</i>	OE	releasing	euphemism
<i>utsip</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>wælweg</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>gewitednes</i>	OE	departure	euphemism
<i>woruldgedal</i>	OE	separation (from world)	euphemism
<i>hen(en)sith&lt;</i>	OE-c1200	journey	euphemism
<i>heononsip</i>			
<i>forthsithe&lt;forpsip</i>	OE+a1240	journey	euphemism
<i>souling&lt;sawlung</i>	OE-c1440	separation (from soul)	euphemism
<i>ending&lt;endung</i>	OE-c1485	ending	euphemism
<i>death&lt;deap</i>	OE-		neutral
<i>forthfare</i>	c1205	journey	euphemism
<i>way-sith</i>	c1205	journey	euphemism
<i>life's/live's end</i>	c1205-1830	ending	euphemism
<i>fall</i>	c1205-	falling	euphemism
<i>fine</i>	c1250-1556	ending	euphemism
<i>dying</i>	1297-		neutral
<i>starving</i>	a1300-c1440	becoming rigid	euph-neutral
<i>parting</i>	a1300-1857	departure	euphemism
<i>end</i>	c1305-	ending	euphemism
<i>depart</i>	c1330-1742	departure	euphemism
<i>decease</i>	c1330-	departure	euphemism
<i>perishing</i>	a1340-	perishing	euphemism
<i>finishment</i>	c1340-1873	ending	euphemism
<i>obit</i>	c1375-1694	falling/perishing	euphemism
<i>last end</i>	1377-1611	ending	euphemism
<i>resolution</i>	1382-1582	separation	euphemism
<i>passing forth</i>	1387	journey	euphemism
<i>carrion</i>	1387-1481	putrefying flesh	dysphemism
<i>departing</i>	1388-1633	departure	euphemism
<i>passage</i>	1390-1693	departure/journey	euphemism
<i>trespasement</i>	c1400-1475	departure	euphemism
<i>sesse</i>	1417	end	euphemism
<i>cesse</i>	1419	end	euphemism
<i>latter end</i>	1422+1630-1710	end	euphemism
<i>departison</i>	c1450-c1475	departure	euphemism
<i>department</i>	c1450-1477	departure	euphemism
<i>dormition</i>	1483+a1656+1849 -(1869)	sleep	euphemism
<i>debt of/to nature</i>	1494-(1812)	paying debt	euph-dysphem
<i>passing</i>	1512+1869-	departure/journey	euphemism
<i>dissolution</i>	1522-(1856)	separation/end	euphemism
<i>expiration</i>	1526-1807	breathing	euphemism
<i>funeral</i>	1575-1705	burial	euphemism
<i>transmigration</i>	1576-1675	journey	euphemism
<i>dissolving</i>	1577	separation/end	euphemism
<i>departance</i>	1579	departure	euphemism
<i>passage</i>	1645-1827	journey/departure	euphemism
<i>disanimation</i>	1646	loss of life	euphemism
<i>passover</i>	a1662	journey/departure	euphemism

<i>launching into eternity</i>	1669	journey/departure	euphemism
<i>finis</i>	1719-1871	end	euphemism
<i>perch</i>	1722 sl	falling (off bird's perch)	dysphemism
<i>demission</i>	1735	releasing	euphemism
<i>demise</i>	1754-	transference of property	euphemism
<i>translation</i>	1760-(1878)	transference	euphemism
<i>transit</i>	1765-(1859)	journey/departure	euphemism
<i>dropping</i>	1768	falling	euphemism
<i>expiry</i>	c1790-	breathing	euphemism
<i>departal</i>	1823	departure	euphemism
<i>snuffing out</i>	1922	extinguishing candle	dysphemism
<i>fade-out</i>	1939-	fading (from domain of cinematography)	dysphemism
<i>the last round up</i>	1932-(1940)	meeting (from domain of driving cattle)	dysphemism
<i>an appointment in Samarra</i>	1933-	meeting (personification of death)	euph-dysphem
<i>the big/endless sleep</i>	s	sleep	euphemism
<i>curtains</i>	s	closing curtains (theatrical metaphor)	dysphemism
<b>.general loss of life (010202/07)</b>			
<i>cwealmbarnes</i>	OE	violent death/destruction, ruin	euphemism/neutral
<i>feorhcwalu</i>	OE	end of life	euphemism
<i>feorhcwealm</i>	OE	end of life	euphemism
<i>feorhlyre</i>	OE	loss of life	euphemism
<i>lifleast</i>	OE	loss of life	euphemism
<i>liflyre</i>	OE	loss of life	euphemism
<i>morp</i>	OE	mortality	euphemism
<i>ofercwealm</i>	OE	mortality	euphemism
<i>quale&lt;cwalu</i>	OE-c1205	violent death/destruction	euphemism/neutral
<i>qualm&lt;cwealm</i>	OE-c1386	violent death/destruction	euphemism/neutral
<i>wal&lt;wæl</i>	OE-c1205	violent death/destruction	euphemism/neutral
<i>mort</i>	c1330-1536+1560sc	mortality	euphemism
<i>murrain</i>	1387-a1632	mortality	euphemism
<i>mortality</i>	c1400-(1863)	mortality	euphemism
<i>loss of life</i>	1582-	loss of life	euphemism

Table 3.2

## Metaphors in verbs meaning 'die' (010202)

<u>FORM</u>	<u>DATES OF USE</u>	<u>METAPHOR</u>	<u>NEUTRAL/ EUPHEMISM/ DYSPEHEMISM</u>
<i>acwelan</i>	OE	perishing	euphemism
<i>adeadian</i>	OE	failing, decay	euphemism
<i>asteorfan</i>	OE		euph-neutral
<i>asweltan</i>	OE		euph-neutral
<i>aswindan</i>	OE	perishing	euphemism
<i>becwelan</i>	OE		neutral
<i>belifan</i>	OE	loss (of life)	euphemism
<i>beon gelogod to his folcum</i>	OE		euphemism
<i>(ge)cringan</i>	OE	yielding (in battle)	euphemism
<i>*deagan</i>	OE		neutral
<i>diegan</i>	OE		neutral
<i>(ge)dreosan</i>	OE	falling	euphemism
<i>geendian</i>	OE	end	euphemism
<i>gefeallan</i>	OE	falling	euphemism
<i>feorh agiefan</i>	OE	loss (of life)	euphemism
<i>feorh gesellan</i>	OE	loss (of life)	euphemism
<i>feorh losian</i>	OE	loss (of life)	euphemism
<i>geferan</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>feran forþ</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>gast onsendan</i>	OE	separation (from soul)	euphemism
<i>glidan</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>hweorfan</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>leoran</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>lif geendian</i>	OE	end (of life)	euphemism
<i>linnan ealdre</i>	OE	loss (of life)	euphemism
<i>(ge)losian</i>	OE	loss (of life)	euphemism
<i>opcwelan</i>	OE		neutral
<i>sawlian</i>	OE	separation (from soul)	euphemism
<i>tostencan</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>towitan</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>unætnessa gebidan</i>	OE	loss (of life)	euphemism
<i>gewitan of lice</i>	OE	journey	euphemism
<i>befall&lt;befeallan</i>	OE+c1160	falling	euphemism
<i>i-wite&lt;gewitan</i>	OE-c1205	journey	euphemism
<i>forswelt&lt;forsweltan</i>	OE+a1225	perishing	euph/neutral
<i>quelle&lt;cwelan</i>	OE-a1250		neutral
<i>to go of life&lt;of life</i>	OE-c1250	journey	euphemism
<i>forthfare&lt;forþfaran</i>	OE+a1175-c1350	journey	euphemism
<i>fare&lt;faran</i>	OE+c1175-1377	journey	euphemism
<i>swelt&lt;sweltan</i>	OE- c1300+c1375dl-		neutral
<i>be dead&lt;dead</i>	OE-1388		neutral
<i>forfere&lt;forferan</i>	OE-1400	journey	euphemism
<i>dead&lt;deadian</i>	OE-c1425		neutral
<i>wite&lt;witan</i>	OE-c1480	journey	euphemism
<i>wend (forth, hence, etc.)&lt;wendan</i>	OE-1567	journey	euphemism

<i>go/depart out of this world</i> < <i>gan</i>	OE-c1588	journey	euphemism
<i>starve</i> < <i>steorfan</i>	OE-a1657	become rigid	euph-neutral
<i>to give up the ghost</i> < <i>gast agiefan</i>	OE-	separation (from soul)	euphemistic
<i>die</i>	c1135-		neutral
<i>wend to/into</i> ( <i>heaven/hell/ bliss</i> )	c1200-c1480	journey	euphemism
<i>let (one's) life end</i>	c1200-1577/87	loss (of life)	euphemism
<i>to-swelt</i>	c1200-1858	end	euphemism
<i>to-worth</i>	c1205	perishing	euphemism
<i>a-deadan</i>	c1205	perishing	euphemism
<i>aswelt</i>	c1230		neutral
<i>yield (up) the ghost/soul/breath/life</i>	c1230-c1300	perishing	euphemism
<i>take the way of death</i>	c1290-	separation (from soul/life)	euphemism
<i>flee</i>	1627+1844ai-	journey	euphemism
<i>leave one's breath</i>	1297	journey	euphemism
<i>take (one's) fine</i>	a1300	breathing	euphemism
<i>die up</i>	a1300	end	euphemism
<i>spill</i>	a1300-1563/87	perishing	euphemism
<i>pass (hence)</i>	a1300-1592	loss (of vital fluid)	euph/dysphem
<i>shed (one's own) blood</i>	a1300-	journey	euphemism
<i>tine/leave/lose the sweat</i>	a1300-	loss (of vital fluid)	euphemism
<i>leese one's life-dawes</i>	c1320-1513	loss (of vital fluid)	euphemism
<i>part hence</i>	c1325	loss (of life)	euphemism
<i>do (one's) fine</i>	c1325	journey	euphemism
<i>miscarry</i>	c1330	end	euphemism
<i>trance</i>	a1340-1749	journey	euphemism
<i>flit</i>	1340-a1500	journey	euphemism
<i>determine</i>	1340-1619	journey	euphemism
<i>pass away</i>	c1374+1607	end	euphemism
<i>disperish</i>	c1375+1806-	journey	euphemism
<i>be gathered to one's fathers/ people</i>	1382	perishing	euphemism
<i>shut one's life</i>	1382-	meeting	euphemism
<i>go</i>	1390	closing	euphemism
<i>fine</i>	1390-	journey	euphemism
<i>part of this life</i>	a1400	end	euphemism
<i>sye hethen/of life</i>	a1400	journey	euphemism
<i>tine</i>	a1400-a1400/50	journey	euphemism
<i>expire</i>	a1400-c1475+	perishing	euphemism/neutral
<i>seek out of life</i>	1570sc-		
<i>pass the ghost</i>	a1400-	breathing	euphemism
<i>leave one's life</i>	c1400	journey	euphemism
<i>go west</i>	c1400-1621	separation (from soul)	euphemism
<i>have the death</i>	c1400-1635	departure	euphemism
<i>decease</i>	c1400-	journey	euphemism
<i>ungo</i>	c1435		neutral
<i>expire the soul</i>	1439-(1868)	journey	euphemism
<i>take the death</i>	c1450	perishing	euphemism/neutral
<i>espire</i>	c1450-1715/20	breathing	euphemism
<i>pay the debt of nature</i>	c1470		neutral
<i>vade</i>	1483	breathing	euphemism
	1494-(1812)	paying debt	euph-dysphem
	1495-a1678	fading	euphemism

<i>depart</i>	1501-	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>decease this world</i>	1515	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>trespass</i>	1523	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>galp up the ghost</i>	1529	separation (from soul)	euphemism
<i>vade away</i>	1530-1625	fading	euphemism
<i>trespass this life</i>	a1533	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>end one's days</i>	a1533-	end	euphemism
<i>die the death</i>	1535-		neutral
<i>change one's life</i>	1546	substitution	euphemism
<i>jet</i>	1546	<i>journey</i> (strolling)	dysphemism
<i>depart to God</i>	1548	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>play topple up tail</i>	1573	falling (over)	dysphemism
<i>peak over the perch</i>	1575-1633	falling (off perch)	dysphemism
<i>inlaik</i>	c1575-1785sc	failing	euphemism
<i>finish</i>	1578-1611	end	euphemism
<i>ghost</i>	a1586+1689	separation (from soul)	euphemism
<i>pitch over the perch</i>	1587	falling (off perch)	dysphemism
<i>relent</i>	1587	failing/surrender	euphemism
<i>unbreathe</i>	1589	breathing	euphemism
<i>pick over the perch</i>	1591	falling (off perch)	dysphemism
<i>transpass</i>	1592	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>breathe one's last</i>	1593-1850	breathing	euphemism
<i>(breath)</i>			
<i>lose one's breath</i>	1596	breathing	euphemism
<i>walk the way of</i>	1597	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>nature</i>			
<i>depart this life</i>	1597-	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>part</i>	1599-	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>go off</i>	1605-	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>go the way of all flesh</i>	1609-	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>go away</i>	1611	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>make a die (of it)</i>	1611-(1883) sl	causation of death	dysphemism
<i>fail</i>	1613	failing	euphemism
<i>drop</i>	1654 cq&sl	falling	dysphemism
<i>pay nature's due</i>	1657	paying debt	euph-dysphem
<i>kick up</i>	a1658+1813	falling (over)	dysphemism
<i>cross Jordan</i>	1684	<i>journey</i> (cross river)	euphemism
<i>march off</i>	1693/4	<i>journey</i> (marching)	dysphemism
<i>pike off</i>	1697	<i>journey</i> (going quickly)	dysphemism
<i>die off</i>	1697-	<i>journey</i> (going one after another)	dysphemism
		<i>journey</i>	euph/dysphem
<i>go out</i>	1697-	falling	dysphemism
<i>drop off</i>	1699 cq&sl-	falling	dysphemism
<i>tip off</i>	a1700-1735 sl	ending (work)	dysphemism
<i>knock off</i>	a1704 sl	releasing/separation	euphemism
<i>vent one's soul</i>	1718	surrendering/failing	euphemism
<i>sink</i>	1718-1804	<i>journey</i>	euphemism
<i>launch into eternity</i>	1720	transference of property	euphemism
<i>demise</i>	1727-(1783)rr	falling (off perch)	dysphemism
<i>tip (over) the perch</i>	1737-1808 sl	releasing (nautical)	dysphemism
<i>slip one's cable</i>	1751-1868 na	lying underground	dysphemism
<i>turf it</i>	1763 sl	<i>journey</i> (laboured progress)	dysphemism
<i>move off</i>	1764 cq	meeting	euph/dysphem
		falling from support (butchering)	dysphemism
<i>join the majority</i>	1764-		
<i>pop off (the hooks)</i>	1764 sl		

<i>pack off</i>	1766+1914-	departure (when dismissed)	dysphemism
<i>fall</i>	1780-	falling	euphemism
<i>kick the bucket</i>	1785 sl-	kicking	dysphemism
<i>hop the perch</i>	1791-1822	falling (off)	dysphemism
<i>hop (off)</i>	1797-	falling (off)	dysphemism
<i>pass on</i>	1804/20-	journey	euphemism
<i>exit</i>	1806	departure (theatrical)	dysphemism
<i>croak</i>	1812 sl-	death-rattle	dysphemism
<i>go to glory</i>	1814 cq-	journey	euph/dysphem
<i>go home</i>	1816 dl	journey/reunion	euphemism
<i>sough away</i>	1816 sc-	breathing	euphemism
<i>slip one's breath/wind</i>	a1819-(1856) cq	releasing/breathing	dysphemism
<i>stiffen</i>	1820	becoming rigid	dysphemism
<i>drop short</i>	1826 cq&sl	failing (to finish)	dysphemism
<i>go over to the majority</i>	1837	meeting	euph/dysph
<i>drop/slip/etc. off the hooks</i>	1840 sl-	falling from support (butchering)	dysphemism
<i>succumb</i>	1849-	surrendering	euphemism
<i>cash/pass/send in one's checks</i>	1857 cq&cf us	ending (gambling)	dysphemism
<i>walk</i>	1858 sl	journey (walking)	dysphemism
<i>turn one's toes up</i>	1860	becoming rigid	dysphemism
<i>snuff out</i>	1865 sl&cq-	extinguishing candle	dysphemism
<i>hand in one's checks</i>	1870 us&cq	ending (gambling)	dysphemism
<i>peg out</i>	1870-	releasing (sporting)	dysphemism
<i>pass in one's cheques</i>	1872-(1900) sl	ending (gambling)	dysphemism
<i>go bung</i>	1882-1885 au & nz sl	becoming useless/ruined	dysphemism
<i>pass over to the majority</i>	1883	meeting	euph/dysphem
<i>go/pass to one's reward</i>	1883 in&ogus	journey/reward	euph/dysphem
<i>stepout</i>	1884-1903 us&sl	journey (walking)	dysphemism
<i>cash in (one's checks)</i>	1884-	ending (gambling)	dysphemism
<i>get one's/the call</i>	1884 dl&li	summons	euphemism
<i>snuff it</i>	1885 sl-	extinguishing candle	dysphemism
<i>perch</i>	1886 sl	falling (off perch)	dysphemism
<i>end up</i>	1886 sl-	end (bad)	dysphemism
<i>go up the flume</i>	1888	journey (up industrial water channel)	dysphemism
<i>knock over</i>	1892 cq & sl	fall (over)	dysphemism
<i>pass out</i>	1899 cq-	departure	euph/dysphem
<i>pass over</i>	1909-	journey (from domain of spiritualism)	euphemism
<i>silver cord is loosed</i>	1911-	releasing	euphemism
<i>pip (out)</i>	1913-1920	defeat	dysphemism
<i>cop it</i>	1915 sl-	being caught	dysphemism
<i>snuff</i>	1916 sl&cq	extinguishing candle	dysphemism
<i>kick off</i>	1921 sl&ogus-	kicking/departure	dysphemism
<i>shuffle off</i>	1922 cq-	departure (allusion to <i>Hamlet</i> , III i 67)	dysphemism
<i>step off</i>	1926 sl	journey (walking)	dysphemism
<i>take the ferry</i>	1928	journey (of spec. type)	dysphemism
<i>off it</i>	1930 sl	departure	dysphemism
<i>cross over</i>	1930-1935 eu	journey	euphemism
<i>crease it</i>	1959 sl	being drained	dysphemism

<i>kiss off</i>	1970 sl	being killed	dysphemism
<i>bite the bullet/big one</i>	s	being killed	dysphemism
<i>bite the dust</i>	s	fall (down)	dysphemism
<i>bow out</i>	s	departure (theatrical)	dysphemism
<i>buy it</i>	s	obtaining	dysphemism
<i>buy the big one</i>	s	obtaining	dysphemism
<i>buy the farm</i>	s	obtaining	dysphemism
<i>cash in one's chips</i>	s	ending (gambling)	dysphemism
<i>check out (of that great hotel they call life)</i>	s	departure	dysphemism
<i>clock out</i>	s	departure (from work)	dysphemism
<i>cop one's whack/ lot</i>	s	being caught	dysphemism
<i>croak it</i>	s	death rattle	dysphemism
<i>cross over</i>	s	journey	euphemism
<i>cross the great divide</i>	s	journey	euphemism
<i>drop/fall off one's perch</i>	s	falling of perch	dysphemism
<i>fall asleep/go to sleep</i>	s	sleep	euphemism
<i>go for an early shower</i>	s	departure (sports)	dysphemism
<i>go to a better place</i>	s	journey	euphemism
<i>go to heaven</i>	s	journey	euphemism
<i>(go to) meet one's maker</i>	s	meeting	dysphemism (formerly euphemistic?)
<i>go to the great ____ in the sky</i>	s	journey	dysphemism (formerly euphemistic?)
<i>go/pass/cross to the other side</i>	s	journey	euphemism
<i>join the choir invisible</i>	s	meeting (parody of euphemistic language)	dysphemism
<i>meet Saint Peter</i>	s	meeting (familiar)	dysphemism
<i>pop one's clogs</i>	s	becoming naked	dysphemism
<i>push/kick up daisies</i>	s	lying underground	dysphemism
<i>reach the end (of the line)</i>	s	ending	euphemism
<i>rung/slip down the curtain</i>	s	closing curtain (theatrical)	dysphemism
<i>shuffle off/depart/ leave this mortal coil</i>	s	departure	euphemism
<i>swim /cruise the Styx</i>	s	journey	dysphemism
<i>turn/curl up one's toes</i>	s	becoming rigid	dysphemism

A number of the items in both noun and verb classes might be described as **extravagant usages** (see p.45). An example might be *appointment in Samarra*. It was first recorded, according to the *OED*, by Somerset Maugham in his play 'Sheppey', where the character 'Death' states that he has an appointment with another character (who later dies) in the Iraqi town of Samarra. It has since

been transferred to mean 'inevitable disaster' and is almost certainly obsolete in its meaning 'death', but in the interim it was used by writers following Maugham as an extravagant means of denoting 'death'.

## Summary of analysis of metaphors

In his study of euphemisms, Ayto (1993:233) proposes the following list as the successful metaphors operating in the language of death in English today:

- 1) Death as rest or some other form of non-consciousness
- 2) Journey/leaving
- 3) Summons
- 4) Loss for those who knew the deceased
- 5) End

## OE - PDE

We can see from our study that the metaphors of 'journey', 'end' and 'loss' have remained consistently popular, although 'loss', contrary to Ayto's (1993) view, is more commonly the loss of life or of vital fluid for the deceased than 'loss for those who knew the deceased'. We should add to Ayto's list the following metaphors we have found to be commonly used: 'separation', 'meeting', 'releasing', 'perishing' and 'mortality'. 'Perishing' and 'mortality' or 'liability to die' are closely related in meaning to 'death' but are nonetheless metaphorical when used to mean 'death' or 'die'. The metaphors of 'failing' and 'surrendering/yielding' appear in OE and reappear commonly in PDE. 'Closing' appears in OE and is revived in PDE in the 'closing curtains' metaphor. 'Falling', present in OE, becomes very common in PDE with the added dysphemistic elements of 'falling off a perch' or 'tumbling over'. Similarly, 'becoming rigid', present in the originally euphemistic *steorfan* (see pp.81-82), is used dysphemistically in PDE forms.



## OE - ME

The rather grim metaphors of ‘destruction/violence’, and ‘putrefying flesh’ used in Old and Middle English, are entirely absent from PDE. This may be due in part to changes in attitudes towards death. The evidence suggests (see ch. 4) that our ancestors were less squeamish than ourselves about the physical facts of death, and it may be that it was possible to use euphemistically in OE concepts that could only be used dysphemistically in the modern period. The ‘cup of death’ and ‘shadow of death’ metaphors, probably representative of poetic themes of times past, are likewise obsolete.

## PDE

Both *kick the bucket* and *kick off* use the metaphor ‘kicking’, probably inspired by the death-throes; the metaphors of ‘the death-rattle’ ‘becoming naked’ ‘burial’ and ‘lying underground’ also appear. A number of PDE metaphors make only one appearance in our study; the verb *make a die of it*, contains the metaphor which I have called ‘causation of death’; its rarity perhaps stems from the ..inappropriateness of perceiving the act of dying as something we might voluntarily do. Also unique is the metaphor of ‘becoming useless/ruined’ which appears to lie behind the Australian English *go bung*, and the metaphor of ‘being drained’ in *crease it*. The metaphor of ‘substitution’, seems to stem from the idea of changing one kind of life for another, and its confinement to PDE is perhaps due to its omission of the idea of progress from this life to the next, a concept integral to medieval eschatology. The ‘extinguishing candle’ and ‘fading’ metaphors are, despite the pleasant connotations of both, felt to be used dysphemistically in the items above, e.g., the 1896 quotation from the *Daily News*:

**I have the pleasure to inform you that your mother-in-law snuffed it.**

The metaphors of ‘summons’ and ‘sleeping’, contrary to Ayto’s (1993) view, and reportedly popular in other languages, appear to be

rarely used in English, although a visit to a graveyard will reveal that ‘falling asleep’ is a euphemism which commonly appears on tombstones. The discrepancy in this case is, therefore, one of register; the ‘sleeping’ metaphor is restricted to a domain - ‘tombstone inscriptions’ - which is not represented by the *OED*.

The metaphors of ‘defeat’, ‘being caught’ and ‘being killed’ reveal a perception of death as the enemy. On the other hand, the metaphor which I have called ‘obtaining’, seen in popular contemporary metaphors such as ‘buy the farm’ and ‘bought it’, implies achievement. The ‘obtaining’ metaphor appears to be exclusively dysphemistic, however, and probably ironic, mocking the ambitions people harbour for their retirement.

The next stage will be a comparison of words meaning ‘death’ and ‘die’ in the year 1400 with those used in 1950 in order to illustrate the increased presence of dysphemism in this area of the language. The first date was selected as a time at which we would expect a particularly high ratio of euphemism due to the huge number of French loan-words entering the language (see pp.86-90). The year 1950 is expected to show a far higher incidence of dysphemisms, for reasons which will be discussed below (pp.78-80, 118-119).

Table 3.3

Comparison of successive states of nouns

1400	Euphemism/ dysphemism	1950	Euphemism/ dysphemism
<i>souling</i>	euphemism	<i>death</i>	neutral
<i>ending</i>	euphemism	<i>fall</i>	euphemism
<i>death</i>	neutral	<i>dying</i>	neutral
<i>life's/live's end</i>	euphemism	<i>end</i>	euphemism
<i>fall</i>	euphemism	<i>decease</i>	euphemism
<i>fine</i>	euphemism	<i>perishing</i>	euphemism
<i>dying</i>	neutral	<i>passing</i>	euphemism
<i>starving</i>	euphemism	<i>departure</i>	euphemism
<i>parting</i>	euphemism	<i>quietus</i>	euphemism
<i>end</i>	euphemism	<i>demise</i>	euphemism

<i>depart</i>	euphemism	<i>thirty</i>	dysphemism
<i>decease</i>	euphemism	<i>fade-out</i>	dysphemism
<i>perishing</i>	euphemism	<i>the last round-up</i>	dysphemism
<i>finishment</i>	euphemism	<i>an appointment in</i>	euph - dysphem
		<i>Samarra</i>	
<i>obit</i>	euphemism	<i>loss of life</i>	euphemism
<i>last end</i>	euphemism	<i>the big/endless sleep</i>	euphemism
		<i>(s)</i>	
<i>resolution</i>	euphemism	<i>curtains (s)</i>	dysphemism
<i>passing forth</i>	euphemism		
<i>carrion</i>	dysphemism		
<i>departing</i>	euphemism		
<i>passage</i>	euphemism		
<i>trespasement</i>	euphemism		
<i>mort</i>	euphemism		
<i>murrain</i>	euphemism		
<i>mortality</i>	euphemism		

**Table 3.4**

### Comparison of successive states of verbs

1400	Euphemism/ dysphemism	1950	Euphemism/ dysphemism
<i>forfere</i>	euphemism	<i>give up the ghost</i>	euphemism
<i>dead</i>	neutral	<i>die</i>	neutral
<i>wite</i>	euphemism	<i>pass (hence)</i>	euphemism
<i>wend (forth/hence)</i>	euphemism	<i>shed (one's own)</i>	euphemism
		<i>blood</i>	
<i>go/depart out of this</i>	euphemism	<i>pass away</i>	euphemism
<i>world</i>			
<i>starve</i>	neutral	<i>be gathered to one's</i>	euphemism
		<i>fathers/people</i>	
<i>give/yield up the</i>	euphemism	<i>go west</i>	euphemism
<i>ghost</i>			
<i>die</i>	neutral	<i>depart</i>	euphemism
<i>wend to/into</i>	euphemism	<i>end one's days</i>	euphemism
<i>heaven/hell/bliss</i>			
<i>let (one's) life</i>	euphemism	<i>die the death</i>	neutral
<i>end</i>	euphemism	<i>breathe one's last</i>	euphemism
<i>die up</i>	euphemism	<i>depart this life</i>	euphemism
<i>spill</i>	euphemism	<i>part</i>	euphemism
<i>pass (hence)</i>	euphemism	<i>go off</i>	euphemism
<i>shed (one's own)</i>	euphemism	<i>go the way of all flesh</i>	euphemism
<i>blood</i>			
<i>tine/leave/lose the</i>	euphemism	<i>cross Jordan</i>	euphemism
<i>sweat</i>			
<i>miscarry</i>	euphemism	<i>die off</i>	dysphemism
<i>trance</i>	euphemism	<i>go out</i>	dysphemism
<i>flit</i>	euphemism	<i>drop off</i>	dysphemism
<i>determine</i>	euphemism	<i>join the majority</i>	euph/dysphem
<i>be gathered to one's</i>	euphemism	<i>pop off (the hooks)</i>	dysphemism
<i>fathers/people</i>			

<i>go</i>	euphemism	<i>pack off</i>	dysphemism
<i>fine</i>	euphemism	<i>fall</i>	euphemism
<i>part of this life</i>	euphemism	<i>kick the bucket</i>	dysphemism
<i>sye hethen/of life</i>	euphemism	<i>hop (off)</i>	dysphemism
<i>tine</i>	euphemism	<i>pass on</i>	euphemism
<i>expire</i>	euphemism	<i>croak</i>	dysphemism
<i>seek out of life</i>	euphemism	<i>go to glory</i>	euphemism
<i>pass the ghost</i>	euphemism	<i>drop/slip off the hooks</i>	dysphemism
<i>leave one's life</i>	euphemism	<i>succumb</i>	euphemism
<i>go west</i>	euphemism	<i>cash/pass/send in one's checks</i>	dysphemism
		<i>snuff out</i>	dysphemism
		<i>peg out</i>	dysphemism
		<i>go/pass to one's reward</i>	euph/dysphem
		<i>cash (in)</i>	dysphemism
		<i>get one's/the call</i>	euphemism
		<i>snuff it</i>	dysphemism
		<i>end up</i>	dysphemism
		<i>pass over</i>	euphemism
		<i>cop it</i>	dysphemism
		<i>snuff it</i>	dysphemism
		<i>kick off</i>	dysphemism
		<i>shuffle off</i>	dysphemism
		<i>step off</i>	dysphemism
		<i>take the ferry off it</i>	dysphemism
		<i>cross over</i>	euphemism
		<i>crease it</i>	dysphemism
		<i>kiss off</i>	dysphemism

In order to conserve space I have not reproduced the verbs collected by the survey again here, but the reader can see from table 3.2 that there are 30 items; 22 dysphemisms and 8 euphemisms.

## Summary of study of euphemism and dysphemism

We can see that the language of 1950 in this area is more heavily dysphemistic than that of 1400. In 1400 there are 25 nouns in use meaning 'death', 22 of which are euphemistic to varying degrees, two of which are neutral and one of which is dysphemistic. In 1950 there are 17 nouns, 10 of which are euphemistic, 5 of which are dysphemistic and 2 are neutral. In 1400 there are 31 verbs in use meaning 'die', 28 of which are euphemistic and three of which are neutral. In 1950 there are 72 words meaning 'die' counting the survey items, 32 of which are euphemistic, 47 of which are

dysphemistic and 2 of which are neutral.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusions

We looked at nouns meaning 'death' and verbs meaning 'die' - the central section of the semantic field 'Death' - from OE to the present day. Despite the difficulties involved in such a study, I believe we are entitled to make the following claims:

- 1) We found that a small number of metaphors have been used consistently to structure our discussion of death throughout the history of the language. Otherwise, a few of the metaphors common in OE have disappeared and, in PDE, a diverse range of new metaphors has appeared. Often, however, metaphors common in OE have reappeared in PDE with added elements which render them dysphemistic, e.g. 'falling' becomes 'falling off a perch'.
- 2) The most striking discovery is the difference between the balance of euphemisms and dysphemisms in the field in 1400 and in 1950. In 1400 the great majority of lexemes for talking about death were euphemistic, whereas in 1950 the field was predominantly dysphemistic. In ch. 4, I will argue that perceptions of death have changed since medieval times and suggest that this may have had an impact on the language. It might be suggested, however, that we feel our helplessness in the face of death particularly difficult to bear in an age in which it is generally believed that scientific progress has enabled us to understand and to do almost anything we want. Dysphemism not only allows us to avoid explicit reference to death, but, unlike euphemism, it enables us to diminish, by means of humour, the power of this formidable enemy.

Readers are reminded of the point made earlier that the explosion in printing has ensured that more words from the colloquial register, in

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<sup>1</sup>The numbers of euphemisms and dysphemisms include those which might have fallen into either category.

which dysphemistic words tend to arise, have survived, and that these may have been more prevalent in earlier periods than the evidence of written record can tell us. It nevertheless seems safe to assume that the language of the earlier literature reflects, at least to some extent, the spoken language of the time. Although outside the scope of this thesis, I suspect that research in the other taboo areas of the language would yield similar results to this study, finding PDE far more dysphemistic. This suggests that it is not the changing perception of death alone that has led to an increase in the dysphemistic language used to discuss it. The factors which have encouraged this increase in all taboo areas of the language are difficult to ascertain, but the following might be contributory factors. The increased freedoms of the modern age have enabled and encouraged greater freedom of expression. And, at a more basic level, the former established centres of authority, most notably the church - and the hierarchical structure of feudal life, despite its faults, provided certainties about life and death which many feel are no longer possible in our secular, democratic age. Gorer (1965:173) writes:

...in England, at any rate, belief in the future life as taught in Christian doctrine is very uncommon today even in the minority who make church-going or prayer a consistent part of their lives; and without some such belief natural death and physical decomposition have become too horrible to contemplate or to discuss.

## **Part 2: Diachronic Studies**

In this section I will give a brief description of the development of three central lexemes in the semantic field 'Death' - *starve*, *decease* and *pass away*. I have selected these lexemes in particular because their development exhibits features discussed in previous chapters. For example, *starve* was once the normal word to express the concept 'die' and has clearly undergone dramatic change. *Decease* and *pass away* entered English as French loan-words and now occupy central positions in the upper registers of the field. Whilst these studies focus upon individual lexemes, I have tried to reflect the fact that the

development of each affects and is affected by the development of other elements of the vocabulary, especially from those within the field.

## Starve

The central, current use of *starve* in PDE is defined by the *OED* as follows:

**To die of hunger; to perish or be in the process of perishing from lack or insufficiency of food; to suffer extreme poverty and want; more emphatically "to starve to death". Also hyperbolically in colloquial use: to be extremely hungry.**

The OE form *steorfan* meant simply 'to die', and in the following pages the development from the OE to the present day meaning is traced.

The word is believed to descend from the Teutonic root *\*sterb-*, thought to have meant 'to be rigid'. This theory is supported by the fact that its descendants include ON *stiarfe* meaning 'epilepsy' and *stiarf-r/stir-finn* meaning 'obstinate', as well as WGmc words meaning 'die', meanings which share the concept of 'being rigid'. If we are to accept this, it seems possible that *steorfan* was originally euphemistic when first used in English; the concept of 'being rigid' has emerged as a metaphor for 'die' in PDE (see p.74).

The original use of *steorfan* to fill the semantic slot 'to die' may have resulted from the avoidance of *\*degan*, ancestor of *die*, as a result of the operation of taboo in this area of the language (see also pp.37-38). According to writers including Bloomfield (1933:401), *\*degan*, replaced the Primitive Indo-European term represented by Latin *mori*: 'to die'. However, there is no instance of the word in surviving OE literature, its sense being expressed by *steorfan* as well as *sweltan* and *wesan dead*. Writers suggest two possible theories: the form may

have been lost early in OE, as it was from Gothic and, subsequently, from all of the continental Germanic languages. It would then have been re-adopted in late OE or early ME from Norse. Otherwise it may have been preserved in OE in some non-standard dialect, re-adopted into the standard in late OE. Whichever view happens to be true, it seems safe to say that *\*degan* was avoided in OE and that this was most likely due to linguistic taboo. Avoidance of a word for this reason typically results in the adoption of a euphemism to fill the slot formerly occupied by the prohibited word. In this case, it appears that *steorfan* was the euphemism used to fill the slot and allow expression of the meaning 'die' without breaking the taboo surrounding it.

## **Narrowing**

The first recorded appearance of *starve* meaning 'die' is from Ælfric's *Homily* dated c1000:

**Annianias and Saphiran ...mid færlicum deaþe ætforan  
þam apostolum steorfende afeollon.**

According to the *OED*, *starve* continued to be used in this meaning until a1657 by which time it was most commonly used to convey the following:

**To die a lingering death, as from hunger, cold, grief, or  
slow disease.**

This is clearly a case of shift by means of narrowing; the linguistic category has shrunk, restricting application of the word to the types of death listed. This can be observed in the following 17th century quotation, taken from a love-poem, in which the meaning 'pining away from grief' rather than instantaneous, or any other kind of death, is clearly intended:

**Margrait..Quho with thy eyes, (least my puir lyfe sould  
sterue), Wouchaiffes to look wt pittie on my paine.**



The shift may have been facilitated by the fact that the early meaning of *starve* could be used to suggest ‘death of the soul’, seen, for example in the following quotation dating from c1175:

**þole us to bi-wepen ure sunne þet we ne steruen noht þer inne.**

The second, more dramatic shift, produced the following meaning:

**With various constructions specifying the cause of death. In later use with modified sense: To be brought gradually nearer to death, to be in process of being killed; to suffer extremely. Now only dialect.**

The *OED* lists three types of death to which *starve*, in this meaning, could be used to refer: ‘grief, love, pestilence, and the like’, ‘cold’ and, first appearing in 1124, ‘hunger’:

**Se man þe æni god heafde him me hit be ræfode þe nan ne heafde stærf of hungor.**

*Starve* continued to be used in this meaning until at least 1735.

It is not difficult to imagine the reasons why *starve of hunger* should have become a common construction at this time, when one considers the connection between hunger and death in the Middle Ages.

Although death by starvation was not an everyday event for the people of pre-industrial England, it was not uncommon for those depending for food on their own efforts and at the mercy of the weather, as well as disease and other crises. For this reason, *starve* would often have been used in the context of death due to lack of food, rendering *starve off/with hunger* a common construction. The quotations indicate that, until around 1735, it was necessary to specify that ‘death by starvation’ was meant by *starve*, due, no doubt, to the fact that during the same period *starve* was also used to mean ‘die’ as well as ‘die of grief, love, pestilence or cold’.

We have seen (p.25) that narrowing occurs when words are used habitually in restricted contexts. The use of *starve* in the context of death by hunger eventually narrowed the meaning, rendering the addition of *of hunger* unnecessary. Another factor leading to narrowing is differentiation between synonyms, and there were many alternatives available to convey the concept 'die' during the period when the meaning of *starve* began to narrow; *die* itself came into use in c1135, fairly soon after *steorfan*, and quickly became popular.

In the language surrounding death and dying, a factor which commonly encourages narrowing is taboo. Use of a form to refer to a topic under a taboo results in that form becoming associated with the taboo meaning and renders it inappropriate for meanings which are not taboo. It is therefore surprising, perhaps, that *starve*, used for centuries to mean 'die', has shifted away from its previous taboo meaning and continued in use. Samuels (1972:77) suggests that the narrowing (specialisation) of *starve* and its synonym *sweltan* was due to their differentiation from *die* in a direction determined by phonaesthetic factors, rather than due to the influence of taboo<sup>2</sup>:

It seems probable that *sweltan* and *steorfan* were euphemisms for \**degan*, and that they had originally in Gmc meant 'burn slowly' and 'grow stiff' respectively. [...] From then on *swelte(n)* and *sterue(n)* were specialised in the direction of their original meanings - *swelte(n)* 'swoon or faint with heat', *sterue(n)* 'die of hunger or cold', 'starve or freeze to death'. The very fact of their specialisation in these directions would appear to rule out the possibility of taboo as a cause of the shift; and since there is no trace of these special meanings in OE, it is most probably to be attributed to 2 factors: availability of ME *deye* [...], and by differentiation from it, specialisation of *swelte(n)* and *sterue(n)* to meanings that derive from the relevant phonaesthemes in ME. [(p.78)..] On this view the change involves a return to the meanings of phonaesthemes that had to some extent existed earlier in Gmc.

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<sup>2</sup>I will not attempt to explain the phenomena of phonaesthesia in this thesis. Interested readers are directed to: Reay (1991).

There may also have been some degree of taboo influence on the narrowing of *starve*, but the predominance in this case of phonaesthetic factors helps to explain the form's survival.

## Weakening

The modern meaning given at the beginning of this study originated, in around 1578, in the use of *starve* as an elliptical form of *starve of hunger*, a shift, by means of weakening, made possible by the narrowing of *starve* from 'die' to 'die of hunger'. This meaning continued until, by 1910, it had weakened to such an extent that the concept 'death' needed to be specified:

**The man was starving to death. Water he did not want.**

This quotation, designated 'emphatic' by the editor, marks the beginning of another shift in the meaning of *starve*, whereby the concept 'death' is no longer included in the meaning of *starve*, and must be specified if intended.

Finally, the *OED* mentions the most recent shift, again a case of weakening, whereby *starve* is used to mean 'to be extremely hungry'. This meaning, designated 'hyperbolically colloquial' by the editor, is the most commonly heard use of *starve* today. Samuels (1972:53) writes:

Though a modern instance of the verb *die* as in *I'm dying to see you*, may strike us as no more than an ephemeral exaggeration limited to certain colloquial registers, yet a parallel devaluation was permanent in the word *starve*, where the gradual weakening can be traced from its collocations: in ME it still meant 'to die' but especially of hunger or cold if these causes were specified (*steruen off/for hunger*).. Since 1600 it has usually had the weaker senses 'be on the point of dying' or 'suffer from extreme hunger' and the older sense, if required, must be expressed by *die of hunger* or

*starve to death.*

To conclude: the development of *starve* from OE to PDE exhibits two main shifts - narrowing, beginning in the 15th century, followed by weakening, beginning in the late 16th century. This weakening appears to have continued to the present day, since the common complaint “I’m starving” is used in almost complete synonymy with “I’m hungry”.

## Decease

In chapter 2 (pp.42-43, 56-58), we saw that the impact of contact with French, a major cause of change in the English vocabulary, can readily be observed in the history of the semantic field ‘Death’. After the Norman Conquest of 1066, French was the language of normal intercourse among the upper classes in England for around 200 years, while English remained the language of the masses.

Baugh and Cable (1993:164) distinguish two main periods of entry of loan-words, with 1250 as the approximate dividing line. In the period before 1250 the borrowings were much less numerous and tend to be associated in meaning with the relationship between the French-speaking nobility and the English-speaking peasantry (*noble, servant, baron*). In the early thirteenth century the ties between France and England began to weaken as a result of the loss of Normandy and other property in France by the English. Members of the English nobility of French origin either returned to France or remained in England as integrated citizens. National spirit improved as the English could begin to see themselves as wholly English, and there was a growing intolerance of the use of French by English men and women. A result of diminished contact with France and increased confidence in England and the English language was that in the years around 1250 those who had been accustomed to speak French were turning increasingly to the use of English. These speakers would naturally transfer into their English vocabulary many

items from their French vocabulary. In fact this group of speakers carried over into English a vast number of commonly used French words - a process which reached its climax around the end of the fourteenth century. *Decease* was one of the hundreds of words borrowed during this period.

Baugh and Cable (1993:165) comment:

In general we may say that in the earlier Middle English period the French words introduced into English were such as people speaking one language often learn from those speaking another; in the century and a half following 1250, when all classes were speaking or learning to speak English, they were also such words as people who had been accustomed to speak French would carry over with them into the language of their adoption.

It is worth repeating that there was a massive increase in the number of borrowings during the period between 1250 and 1400 - the time when English was steadily replacing French all over England. This process, by which a large amount of the vocabulary of a language which is dying out is transferred by speakers into the ascending language, is known as **language death**. In this case the process was aided by the relative prestige of French; speakers were eager to integrate French words into their English speech in order to signal their sophistication.

## **Language contact**

Samuels (1972: 92) distinguishes two types of contact that can take place between languages or varieties of a single language

Type A: stable and continuous contact between neighbouring systems that are adjacent on either the horizontal (regional) or vertical (social) axis;

Type B: sudden contact, resulting from invasion, migration or other population-shift, of systems not normally in contact hitherto.

The contact between French and English during the Middle English period is clearly an instance of Type B resulting from the invasion and subsequent residence of French speakers. These are the circumstances which made the French vocabulary available to speakers of English. Samuels (1972:94) adds:

In contacts of type B, the bilinguals are usually those who learn the second language for reasons of prestige or livelihood - the subjects in a conquered country, or foreign immigrants in an expanding country.

In the case of the contact between English and French, native speakers of English - the subjects in a conquered country - used French for reasons of prestige. This is the major pressure which encouraged selection of foreign items over native items in many areas of the vocabulary. Even in PDE, items of French origin continue to be perceived as relatively prestigious - a legacy from this period of contact, reinforced by the enduring regard for French culture.

Readers are reminded that the structuralist position adopted in this thesis views a language as a system - a whole composed of parts in an ordered but constantly changing arrangement. The vocabulary of any language is a separate system within the greater system of the language itself, and change can arise from within that system (intrasystemic) or from outside it (extrasystemic). The impact of French during this period is, therefore, extrasystemic; foreign items entered the native system necessitating simultaneous reorganisation of its members, an activity which accelerated around 1250 and slowed down around 1400.

Contact necessitates regulation of the vocabulary owing to the limit on the number of synonyms which can exist side by side at any one time, owing, in turn, to the limits on a speaker's ability to understand and desire to use new words. The introduction of a new item into this restricted system will therefore result in one of the following events: the borrowed word may have (near)-synonyms in the native language in which case reorganisation is necessary. Otherwise, the borrowed lexeme may have no existing synonym in the native system in which case it is likely to survive without affecting other lexemes in the field. If the meaning of the word is an entirely new concept to native speakers this involves an increase in the semantic space covered by the vocabulary.

The following diagram is intended to illustrate the impact of a borrowed lexeme on the native system. *Mutton* was borrowed from French *mouton* meaning 'sheep' as well as 'the flesh of a sheep' in the late 13th century.

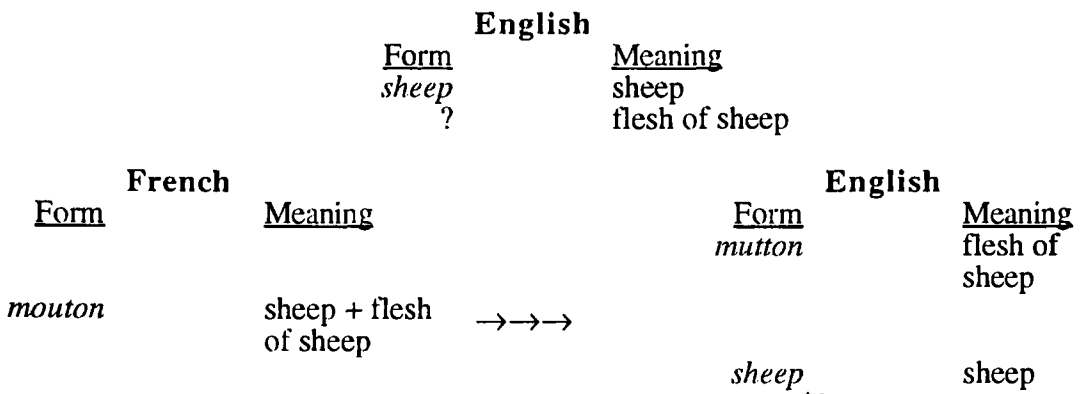


Figure 3.1 Impact of French *mouton*

As we can see, the borrowed lexeme was used with a different, narrower meaning in English. According to the *Historical Thesaurus*, *mutton* was the earliest word in English with the meaning 'the flesh of sheep used as food'. The *Thesaurus* can also tell us that *sheep* (in

contrast with the French system) was never used to include the meaning 'flesh of sheep'. This meaning must have been lexicalized somehow, however, in a society which relied at least to some extent on sheep farming for food, so presumably some sort of periphrasis, such as *flesh of sheep*, was used to convey the meaning. The availability of the new form *mutton* would not therefore have resulted in any narrowing in the meaning of *sheep*. It occupied the slot of semantic space formerly occupied by *flesh of sheep* (or whatever), thereby fully lexicalizing a concept formerly lexicalized by periphrasis.

The reorganisation of meaning in this case lies in the selection of the 'flesh of sheep' element of the meaning of the French loanword to express a concept which lacked concise expression in English, and the discarding of the 'sheep' element of *mouton* which already had adequate expression in English.

This example of the way in which the meaning of the concrete noun *mutton* altered on entry into English provides a model which is, unfortunately, difficult to produce for words with more abstract meaning such as *decease*. There may have been, for example, some change in connotation, difficult to trace now. The significance in this case lies in the effect of the borrowing on other members of the system.

### **Differentiation of synonyms**

In c1330 when *decease* meaning 'death' was first recorded in English, the *Historical Thesaurus* tells us that the following synonyms were in use:

*ending, death, live's end, fine, dying, starving, parting, end, depart*

When a number of synonyms exist in the system at the same time, differentiation tends to occur between them (p.28). Samuels



(1972:65) writes (see also p.57):

Language possesses no pure synonyms, and this fact is not likely to be accidental. As Bréal remarked (1897) ...'the memory does not willingly burden itself with two mechanisms working concurrently towards one and the same end'. If, for extralinguistic reasons such as cultural borrowing or foreign conquest, two exact synonyms exist for a time in the spoken chain, either one of them will become less and less selected and eventually discarded, or a difference of meaning, connotation, nuance or register will arise to distinguish them. Only in rare cases can genuine free variation be said to exist, and, in those with which we are today acquainted it seems probable that one or other of the two processes just mentioned is already at work, though the result, for want of controlled observation, escapes us.

As regards synonyms for *death* and *die*, the evidence suggests that 'free variation' has never existed. In the semantic field 'Death', covering as it does a taboo area of our experience, the lexemes used would seem to distinguish themselves mainly on the basis of register, depending in particular on the explicitness of the word.

*Decease* has remained a commonly used word, unthreatened itself by obsolescence, but 7 of its 9 original synonyms - *ending*, *live's end*, *fine*, *dying*, *starving*, *parting* and *depart* - have themselves become obsolete. The discarding of a synonym is clearly the simplest form of differentiation. Between those synonyms which have remained in use throughout the history of *decease* in English we should be able to observe the process of differentiation. As with many of the words borrowed from French it is likely that *decease* was perceived as a comparatively prestigious word and was therefore incorporated into a relatively high register of English. The *OED* editor comments that it is:

**In its origin a euphemism (L. *decessus* for *mors*), and**

still slightly euphemistic or at least less harsh and realistic than death; it is the common term in legal and technical language where the legal or civil incidence of death is in question, without reference to the act of dying.

Given the limitations of this thesis, it is not possible to ascertain the precise connotations with which particular words were used prior to borrowing into English, although I would hope to address this question in a future piece of work. The meaning of *decease* in English, however, clearly included connotations which distinguished it from *death* and other synonyms. It certainly performed, at the time of its earliest use in English, a euphemistic function, as it does today. We can suppose that the success of *decease* lies in its ability to be used euphemistically when many of its synonyms were losing the euphemistic connotations they once possessed. This was undoubtedly the main direction of differentiation between *decease* and its alternative forms, resulting for the most part in the latter's obsolescence.

The question therefore arises: why was *decease* capable of continued euphemistic use when many of its rival forms lost this feature? The answer lies partly in the prestige bestowed by its French origins; long after France had ceased to have any political dominance over England, its cultural dominance continued and French continued to be perceived as a stylistically superior language. French provenance appears to ensure to a large extent the continued perception of loanwords as subtly superior to native forms. This perceived superiority renders these forms more appropriate for expressing many types of meaning and doing so in a suitable register. This is particularly true in taboo areas where selection of forms is normally motivated by a desire for avoidance of direct reference to the subject.

Another reason for the ability of *decease* to continue to be used euphemistically lies in the restrictions regarding its usage. We have

seen (p.25, 40) that habitual use of a form to refer to a taboo topic encourages narrowing, and therefore, increased explicitness of that form. Throughout its history and today, *decease* has been used to talk about death in the legal, or otherwise formal, domain. Since England was under French rule in the early Middle English period, a great deal of legal language entered English from French. Coleman (1995:102), on the subject of loanwords in the semantic area of 'marriage', writes:

Marriage also displays a high level of early borrowing from French, as the use of French as a language in the practice of the law declined and its legal terminology was adopted into English.

This *OED* quotation, by way of example of the register in which *decease* tended to be used, dates from 1818:

**In case his said daughter should die without issue of her body living at her decease.**

It is likely that its restriction to a fairly formal domain acted as a barrier to the pattern described above whereby the form either becomes obsolete or narrowing occurs and the form becomes incapable of euphemistic use. The special context in which use has occurred has prevented excessive narrowing, enabling the meaning of *decease* to retain its breadth, and, therefore, its indirectness.

## **Pass away**

*Pass away*, perhaps the most popular euphemism for 'die' today, was borrowed from French and used in English with the two meanings 'depart' and 'die'. In the following pages we will look at the development of *pass away*, in order to discover why the form continued in its taboo, rather than its literal, meaning.

The form was first used to mean 'die', according to the *OED*, in

c1375, and 'depart' in a1425. These dates present an apparent contradiction to the normal pattern of extension from literal to metaphorical meaning. There are two possible explanations: either the literal meaning was used earlier in English but no record of it survives, or the form was borrowed twice from French in each of its meanings (see also p.43). It appears that *pass away* was, at any rate, polysemous - a condition under which ambiguity can arise.

## Ambiguity

Ambiguity can arise when the same or similar forms can be used to convey different meanings. In chapter 2 (p.27) we saw that it is one of the factors which leads to semantic change, and that this occurs in the direction of regulating the ambiguity between meanings.

Polysemy can, however, exist without resulting ambiguity: there is rarely, if ever, confusion between the two common meanings of *bear* ('type of animal' and 'carry') because they are clearly differentiated by membership of different word-classes, that is, they occupy different grammatical slots. For polysemy leading to ambiguity which hampers effective communication, there must be significant similarities as well as differences between the meanings in question. In the case of *pass away*, the meanings shared a number of elements as well as occupying similar grammatical slots, allowing the form to be used in broadly similar circumstances and therefore rendering it ambiguous. We can demonstrate these similarities by means of **componential analysis** (see p.95), an approach to the description of meaning of words which rests on the following thesis (Lyons, 1977:317):

...the sense of every lexeme can be analysed in terms of a set of more general sense-components (or semantic features), some or all of which will be common to several different lexemes in the vocabulary.

Shared components of *pass away*

Form	<i>pass away</i>	
Meaning	'depart'	'die'
Component	ACT (OF PERSON)	ACT (OF PERSON)
	BECOME ABSENT FROM WHERE ONE ONCE WAS	BECOME ABSENT FROM WHERE ONE ONCE WAS
	GO ELSEWHERE	GO ELSEWHERE

Figure 3.2 Shared components of *pass away*

Ambiguity is not always an unwanted feature of language, since the speaker does not aim always and only for effective communication of a message. Ambiguous meanings of a form are regularly permitted to coexist for long periods of time, especially when concerned with taboo topics. In the language surrounding sex, for example, ambiguity between literal and extended meanings is often exploited for humorous or erotic effect. *Cock*, avoided in American English (Allan and Burrige (1991) and p.41), survives in both its literal and taboo senses in British English, providing in its ambiguity the basis for many jokes.

Incompatibility of meanings

The problem with the ambiguity of the meanings of *pass away* lies in the difference between and, more importantly, the **incompatibility** of, the meanings. In the following table '-' and '+' represent the negative and positive values of the meaning component 'cease to be

alive’.

<b>Form</b>	<i>pass away</i>	
<b>Meaning</b>	‘depart’	‘die’
<b>Component</b>	- CEASE TO BE ALIVE	+ CEASE TO BE ALIVE

Figure 3.3 Components not shared by *pass away*

The difference in meaning between ‘departing’ and ‘dying’ is such that we want to be able to readily discern which meaning is intended. For this reason, our language system could not long tolerate a form which could equally well mean either. Samuels (1972:65) writes:

If a form has two meanings - whether as the result of polysemy or homonymy so incompatible that they cause ambiguity, one of the meanings dies out, or, more rarely, the form itself becomes obsolete.

### Limitation of ambiguity

Samuels (1972:64) uses the term **limitation** for the process by which ambiguity is regulated. He writes:

Avoidance of ambiguity means that of all the alternative forms available to a speaker, whether in grammatical paradigm or lexical set, he selects only those that are clearest and least likely to give rise to ambiguity, i.e. in each of the many acts of selection necessary for the utterance, he must prefer some forms and reject others.

The process of limitation, whereby one meaning is selected and the other rejected, appears to have occurred in the development of *pass away*. Interestingly, the literal, not the taboo meaning continued in

use for around 300 years; the taboo meaning disappeared after its initial use in c1375, re-emerging in the 19th century. The following diagram describes this process of limitation:

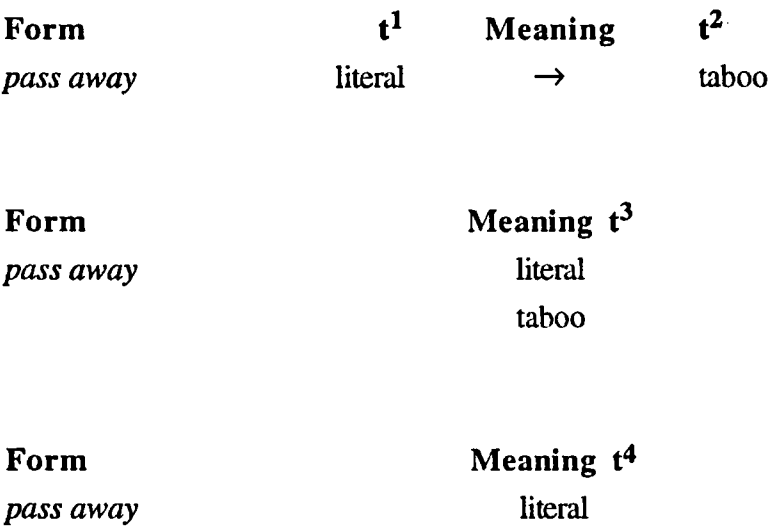


Figure 3.4 Pattern of limitation in *pass away*

The obsolescence in this case of the extended rather than the literal meaning would suggest the influence of some other linguistic phenomenon than taboo. In the case of *starve* (p.84) we discovered phonaesthetic influence, in the case of *pass away* it may have been analogy with similar forms having similar meanings.

The word *pass*, adopted from French, was first recorded in English in the sense:

**To go, proceed, move onward. Of spiritual destination; esp. in to pass to God, heaven, etc.**

Its first appearance is in a manuscript of the *Ancrene Riwe*, dated a1225:

**þet we moten þurh rudi scheome passen to þe heouene.**

This quotation demonstrates that the meaning of *pass* was very close

to ‘die’, recorded in the *Cursor Mundi* in a1300.

**p e ... wittes five ...all sal be tint er saul pas.**

The ‘die’ meaning was used alongside the ‘depart’ meaning from the 13th century onwards. We can identify two distinct lines of development in the meaning of *pass* (see figure 3.5):

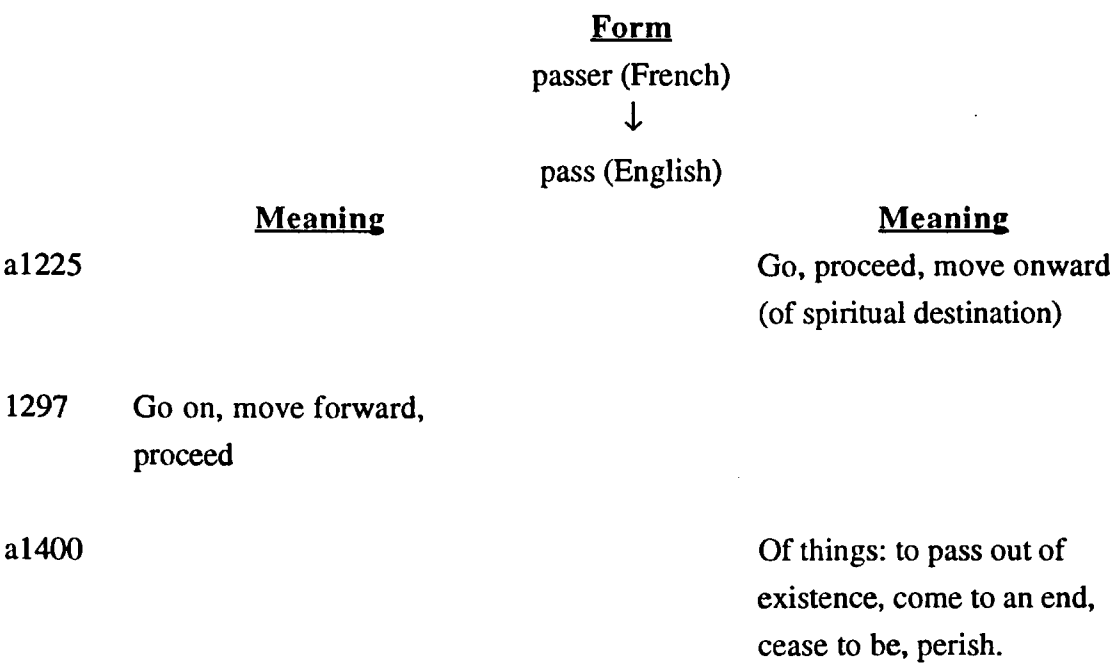


Figure 3.5 Lines of development of *pass*

*Pass* is closely related to *pass away*, not only formally, but in the development of its meanings. It is possible that the early use of *pass away* meaning ‘die’ was supported by its similarities with *pass* and other related forms. We have observed, for example, that the DEATH IS A JOURNEY metaphor has always been highly productive in this area of the language. In use at the time were:

*forfere, wend forth/hence, go/depart out of this world, wend to heaven, pass (hence) and flit*



Use of *pass hethen* in the same text (*Lay Folks Mass Book*, Ms. B) in which *pass away* first appears, is evidence that, not only was *pass* available to mean ‘die’ (as we already know), but that it could be combined with an adverb to convey the sense of ‘go elsewhere’.

Given the brief appearance of *pass away* in the 14th century, it is possible that it was originally an extravagant usage - a metaphor which was unusual at the time of its use (see p.45), and failed to become structurally significant until later. It may also have been restricted to use in a particular context: the quote we are given is taken from a mass book prayer. These factors might help to explain why the taboo meaning had a limited effect on the literal meaning ‘depart’ which was able to continue in regular use after the former’s obsolescence.

The second quotation for *pass away* meaning ‘die’ provided by the *OED* is dated 1806, around 400 years after the first. The *MED*, however, records a usage from a Northern MS. of the *Pricke of Conscience*, dated a1425, which tells us that the lexeme continued to be used in at least this variety of English until at least this date.

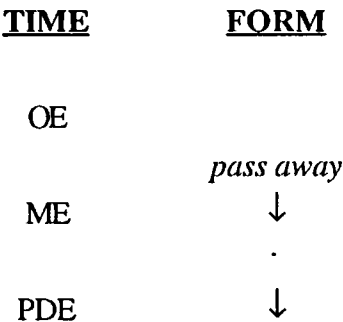


Figure 3.6 Obsolescence and re-emergence of *pass away*

It may be significant that during the period in which *pass away* meaning ‘die’ was re-introduced, the majority of available synonyms were dysphemistic. There was, in fact, an influx of dysphemistic

words entering this area of the vocabulary - of the 10 new lexical items synonymous with *die* which appear in the 2nd half of the century, the following 8 are dysphemistic:

*slip one's cable, turf it, move off, pop off (the hooks), pack off, kick the bucket, hop the perch and hop (off).*

*Pass away* was, therefore, reintroduced during a period in which the majority of its synonyms were highly dysphemistic, and its appearance perhaps encouraged the process by which its synonyms became more dysphemistic by way of differentiation from it. Samuels (1972:67) comments on this kind of process, using the example of *silly*:

...such words [new synonyms] may enter the system for other reasons and it would therefore be equally possible to regard the great extension in the meanings of *silly* as due to differentiation from these words, which could have been exact synonyms to the meanings of *silly* when they entered the system.

We have observed that there is a strong need for euphemistic language, and also that lexemes which were originally euphemistic tend to become less so through habitual use. *Pass away*, then, appears to have filled a slot of meaning ('die' with suitably euphemistic connotations) which seemed in danger of becoming empty.

### **Functional pull**

The process by which 'empty' slots attract forms, is known as functional pull (Samuels, 1972:67 and p.37).

...if one of the meanings of a word is discarded because of ambiguity [...] and there is no new form that is encroaching on the area of the lost meaning, a new slot-filler may arise from borrowing or creation, or the 'pull' of the empty slot may hasten a

new process of extension in another existing word.

In the case of *pass away* there are a number of possible reasons for its selection to fill the slot. It may have survived in dialect throughout the years of its suspected absence, to be borrowed back into the standard in the 19th century. It may have been extended anew from the literal 'depart' meaning. Support for either process would have been provided by the existence of closely related forms, for example, the extension of *pass on* to mean 'die' is dated 1804, only two years before the reappearance of *pass away*.

*Pass away*, like *decease*, appears to have retained its ability to be used euphemistically despite regular use. Today it is regarded by many as the most appropriate synonym for compassionate, respectful reference to dying. Gross (1985:205) attributes its success to two factors. Firstly, the concept of 'passing away' implies an easy transition: there is no dramatic wrench away from this life. Secondly, there is no specified location, so its appropriateness does not depend on one's eschatological beliefs. Arnold Toynbee (1968:131), however, denounces the use of *pass away* and *pass on* as symptomatic of western man's loss of belief in human dignity, a view which implies sympathy with the backlash against euphemism surrounding death which has been a feature of the post-Victorian age, discussed in the following chapter.

## APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 3

This survey was designed to complement the material extrapolated from the *Historical Thesaurus*, from which I found a number of lexical items in current use to be missing, a matter which will undoubtedly be addressed prior to its completion. The survey was distributed to students of English Language at Glasgow University, as well as to friends and associates of all ages and backgrounds.

### SURVEY ON THE LANGUAGE OF DEATH

The following words and phrases comprise the current synonyms of *death* and *die* drawn from the *Historical Thesaurus of English*, in production at Glasgow University.

#### **death** (noun)

appointment in Samarra, decease, departure, end, expiry, quietus, thirty

#### **die** (verb)

cash/pass/send in one's checks, cop it, cross Jordan, depart (this life), die off, die the death, drop off, end up, expire, fall, be gathered to one's fathers/people, get one's/the call, give up the ghost, go, go/depart out of this world, go off/out, go/pass to one's reward, go the way of all flesh, go to Glory, go West, hop (off), join the majority, kick off, kick the bucket, pack off,

part, pass away, pass (hence), pass on, pass out/over, peg out, pop/drop/slip off (the hooks), shed (one's own) blood, shuffle off, snuff it, snuff out, sough away, succumb, tine [Scots dialect], yield (up) the ghost/soul/breath/ life

Can you think of any words or phrases which you use or have heard which are missing from the lists? Please enter your suggestions on the back of this sheet and, if possible, indicate the sort of situation in which the word might be used.

**Example:** 'snuff it', this would be used in a situation where the speaker is not closely involved with anyone's death, and perhaps intends to be humorous.

Please note: there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, just think about what you actually say or hear.

Thank you!

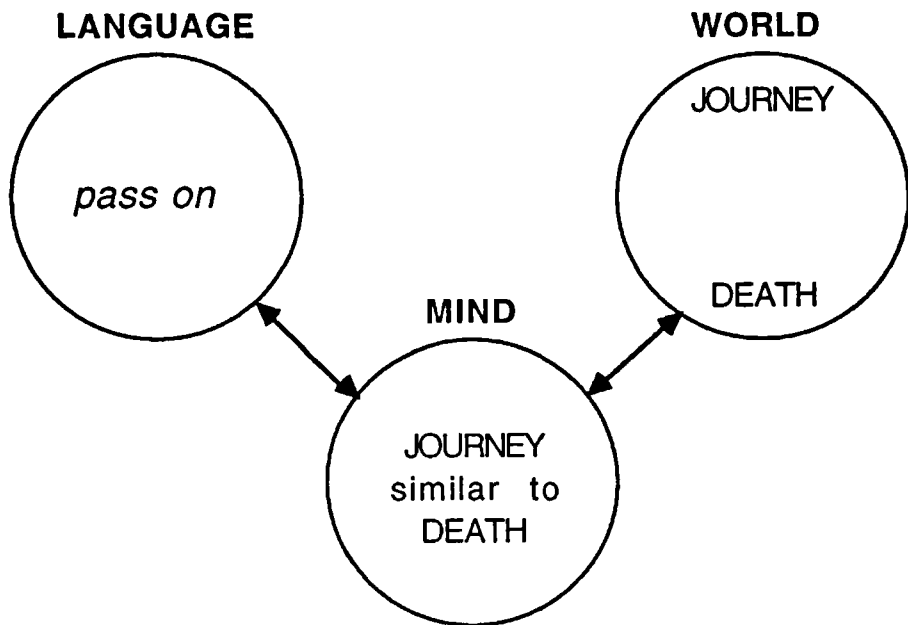
## Chapter 4

### PERCEPTIONS OF DEATH

*One cannot look directly at the sun or at death.<sup>1</sup>*

#### Introduction

This thesis holds that language is both a system with inbuilt strategies for change and regulation, and a social phenomenon, conditioned by our perception of the world.



This simple diagram is intended to show that the mind perceives the world<sup>2</sup>, and that perception of the world affects the way the mind thinks. The mind constructs language, and language affects our perceptions, and there is, therefore, a connection between how we perceive the world and the language we use to discuss it. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (see p.13) emphasises the point that language helps to structure the way we think. Lyons (*Language, Meaning and Context*, 1981:68) writes:

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<sup>1</sup>La Rouchefoucauld (1957: 410)

<sup>2</sup> The philosophical question of whether perception of the world is direct or indirect is outside the scope of this thesis.

...what we think of the world, or reality, is very largely the product of the categories imposed upon the mush of experience and the amorphous flow of thought by the languages we happen to speak.

The connection between perception and language is demonstrated, for example, by the actuation of metaphor, whereby the mind makes a link between its perception of two things in the world - A and B - and uses language to structure discussion of A in terms of B. It might then become usual to talk about A in terms of B, as has happened, for example, with the concept 'death' structured by the concept 'journey' throughout the history of English. There have, however, been significant changes, as well as areas of continuity, in our perceptions of death, and in this chapter I will discuss these changes and suggest correlations with the development of the semantic field 'Death'. Binski (1996:164) writes:

Death, like birth, is of course universal, but the state of death can only be represented or written about from the perspective of the cultural experiences of the living.

I concentrate in other chapters on the development of the language surrounding death, and, in this chapter, I would like to briefly assess the development of perceptions of death, in an attempt to discover correlations between the two. I refer throughout to historical and anthropological material of which I can claim to have no special knowledge. The arguments presented are, however, uncontroversial according to the prominent writers in the relevant fields.

The historian John McManners (1981:3) comments that material dealing with perceptions of death in western history has only recently begun to be produced. He attributes this to the taboo surrounding the investigation of death in western culture. The notion of a 'taboo', in the anthropological sense of the word, surrounding death may be

slightly exaggerated (see also pp.35-36). It may have simply been the case that the way of death in the west was not deemed a subject of interest by academics, compared with the burial rituals and eschatological beliefs of non-westerners. The fact remains, however, that scholars have only recently begun to investigate the ways in which our lives in the west are, and have been, affected by the facts of death, and many (for example, Becker, (1973), Barley (1995) Brain (1979) and Hinton (1980)) comment on the existence of a taboo. Geoffrey Gorer (1965) is generally credited with first challenging the taboo in his article *The Pornography of Death* (first published in 1955), whose title refers to the way in which death has arguably become more heavily tabooed than sex in the modern age. Gorer argues that, whereas in the Victorian age, sex was a forbidden subject while death was freely spoken and written about, in the twentieth century, we deny the reality of death but are obsessed with all things sexual. This argument highlights the fact that there have been changes in the way in which death has been perceived throughout history.

I will not attempt in this thesis to reproduce the evidence provided for the statements about past attitudes to death. Most writers affirm the difficulty of discerning the truth about how people in the distant past viewed the prospect of their own death and that of others. But the evidence used - which includes literature of all kinds such as wills and ecclesiastical documents, as well as tomb sculpture and paintings - offers an account which is unified and at the same time highlights the differences between progressive generations throughout the centuries. Our investigation begins in the Middle Ages, looking at medieval eschatology and perceptions of death.

## **The Middle Ages**

The people of the medieval period were more familiar with death than ourselves for a number of reasons. Life expectancy was far lower - no more than 5% of the population achieved the age of 60 - and infant and child mortality in particular were very high. As a



result, babies were usually baptised on the day of their birth and were often named after an older sibling since only one at best would be expected to reach adulthood. The occurrence of dramatic, widespread death, no longer experienced in Britain today, was not uncommon; in times of famine and disease whole families could quite suddenly be wiped out. Moreover, we should bear in mind that, since death and dying were not institutionalised as they are now, people witnessed the process of dying in their own homes. A development of the early Middle Ages which indicates, perhaps, a greater acceptance of death during this period was that, since the eighth century, the dead had no longer been banished to extramural cemeteries but were buried close to the living, often inside churches. Ariès (1974:14) comments on this development:

...the co-existence of the living and the dead [...] is a new and surprising phenomenon, unknown in pagan antiquity and even in early Christianity. And it has been completely alien to us since the late eighteenth century.

For the people of the early Middle Ages, the event of supreme importance in the eschatological system was the Second Coming of Christ, which involved the general resurrection of the dead. It was believed that, at the time of death, the soul entered a period of waiting with all the other souls of the dead for this event. Initially there was no mention of judgement being passed on the individual - resurrection was a collective, corporate event. Gradually, the Second Coming came to be associated with the Last Judgement, at which each individual soul would be judged separately. In 1274 the doctrine of purgatory was included in the profession of faith, and prayers for the dead became more meaningful and urgent because it was believed that intercession could reduce the length of time a soul spent in purgatory.

Throughout the Middle Ages, beginning around the 12th century, the emphasis moved away from collective judgement, and the decisive event became the death of the individual. Whereas earlier eschatology had maintained a balance between individual and

corporate expectations of the after-life, attention was now concentrated on the individual's hope of salvation, if necessary after a period in purgatory. The theme of general resurrection became secondary to the question of the destiny of the individual. The doctrine of purgatory was discarded during the 16th century at the Reformation, but there was no return to the belief in collective judgement, and no longer any assurance of a waiting period during which the future of one's soul might be negotiated.

Gittings (1984:19-20) lists three principles which have been consistently noted in studies of death in so-called 'primitive' societies and are highly evident in medieval attitudes to death, continuing to some extent until the time of the Reformation<sup>3</sup>.

**1) Burial is not a contemporaneous fact.** Late medieval burial services and ceremonies were often repeated for years after a person's death. Interment was, obviously, clearly pinpointed in time but burial ritual often had a long time span.

**2) Physical death is not the moment of supreme significance.** In early medieval eschatology, bodily death played a subsidiary role - throughout the Middle Ages there was a strong belief in continuity between the states of being alive and being dead. But more attention came to be focused on the moment of death as the point at which the soul would initially be judged. The belief in purgatory, which continued unofficially until well after the Reformation, served as a sort of halfway stage whereby the moment of death was accorded increasingly more, but not supreme significance, since salvation was possible after a period in purgatory.

**3) The behaviour of the living is linked to the state of the dead.** The doctrine of purgatory ensured that the living and the dead were bound by ritual ties. The living could, and were often obliged and even paid to, attempt to shorten the time which the

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<sup>3</sup>In order to conserve space I have summarised and explained these principles myself.

dead would spend in purgatory through prayers of intercession.

The medieval funeral, as one would expect, reflected the beliefs of the time. The dual function of the funeral rite involved, on the one hand, the eschatological element of commending the soul of the deceased to God, and on the other, the social element of keeping his/her memory alive. Lavish, expensive funerals became increasingly popular for members of the upper classes throughout the Middle Ages, and in these cases the interment of the body would often take place weeks after death, without the same degree of ceremony as the three or four preceding ceremonies. There were different views on the appropriate length of time before interment, however, and some testators expressed in their wills a desire to be buried as soon as possible after the moment of death, so that intercession for their soul could begin immediately and in earnest. The desire of others to wait for at least a few days was probably partly motivated by the fear of being buried alive - a common mishap in those days of relatively unsophisticated medical knowledge.

Boase (1972:44-45) discusses the medieval belief that those who enjoyed an easy life on earth would suffer the exact opposite in the afterlife, and attributes its popularity to the harshness of medieval life, especially, but not exclusively, for the poor. He argues that the brutality and injustices inherent in medieval life ensured that the people of this period were more accustomed to, and accepting of, the physical reality of death than those of the modern period. His argument is supported, for example, by the language of medieval memorials which lack the tenderness that we would expect today, and never lapse into the sentimentality favoured in Victorian times. He provides evidence to show that medieval art in general can be seen as confronting mortality in a variety of ways, but always with a lack of sentimentality and a sense of basic resignation to death, an event believed to proceed from a divine justice which stood beyond question.

There has been a tendency, criticised by writers such as Gittings (1984:15), to see the Middle Ages as a sort of 'golden age' of death based on the premise that familiarity with death breeds indifference to it. There is, however, no reason to believe that familiarity with, and even resignation to, death results in a lack of concern over it. McManners (1981:64) writes:

Yet were people really unconcerned, did their evasions and euphemisms avail them, was their apparent callousness anything more than a shield against unbearable pain, a conformity to a convention? The losses that are more frequent and the losses that are expected are not thereby easier to bear.

Another misguided view is that people of the late medieval period in particular were obsessed with death, a view which seems chiefly to be based on the artistic taste of the time. Representations of the 'Dance of Death', for example, were popular and tomb sculpture became increasingly realistic and exaggerated throughout the Middle Ages, until maggot-infested, half decomposed bodies, or 'transi', were commonly seen adorning tombs. The people of this period clearly relished graphic representations of death which we would tend to find macabre or distasteful considering the contexts in which they appear, but Gittings (1984:35) remarks that, although these objects indicate a growing concern with death, it is surprising, considering the ravages of the Black Death in the late fourteenth century, that there is no evidence of much greater anxiety and despair. Art of this nature, often intentionally humorous in its depiction of death personified and physical decomposition, might be understood as a result of the need to come to terms with the destructive power of death.

In the fifteenth century books on the 'Art of Dying' began to appear. They often expressed the view that death could actually be postponed by good intentions, but their main purpose was as guides for an honourable death after the completion of earthly duties. The popularity of these books attests, once again, to the growing concern with death during the Middle Ages.

## **Changing perceptions: causes**

One of the earliest and most prominent writers on the subject of changing perceptions of death was Philippe Ariès (1974, 1981). Ariès first formulated the argument that the growth of individualism throughout the Middle Ages made death increasingly difficult to come to terms with, culminating in the 'death-denying' stance of the modern era. Ariès' pioneering work has been criticised for its generalisations and assumptions, including its tendency to romanticise the 'familiar and accepted' death of the past as opposed to the 'fearsome and unmentionable death' of the present. However, his tying of growing individualism to growing anxiety over death was taken up by Clare Gittings (1984) and the argument was greatly improved.

Gittings (1984:9-10) claims that in the last five centuries, the emphasis on the separateness of each person, rather than on the shared aspects of humanity, has grown. That there has been a gradual increase in individualism in the western world is an acceptable assertion. Certainly, in the modern age, the liberty of the individual has become the cornerstone of western political thought and practice. Gittings argues that, in a scheme where the uniqueness of the individual is stressed, death is seen as more of a crisis, since a unique individual can never be replaced. She provides a great deal of evidence for the growing anxiety over death and its concealment which has taken place. Developments around the late medieval/early modern period include the creation of graveyards, the widespread coffining or embalming of bodies, the institutionalization of death and the creation of the undertaking profession. She points to the growing emphasis in literature on the difference between the soul and the body and the states of life and death throughout the medieval period. Also, the preaching of funeral sermons, heraldic funerals, erection of tombs

Gittings' (1984) argument is convincing, but she has been criticised for exaggerating the importance of the growth of individualism in the development of our so-called 'death-denying' modern view. Other writers stress the undeniable influence of events like the Reformation in influencing attitudes, although it could well be argued that the Reformation was itself a result of growing individualism. Gittings (1984) argues that religious and doctrinal changes have little effect on people's reaction to death and that it has been feelings of loss due to a heightened sense of the uniqueness of individuals, rather than concepts of the after-life that have shaped responses. For the purposes of this thesis, I will accept that a growing sense of individualism, combined with a number of other events and trends, including the growing emphasis on the small nuclear family, changes in life expectancy, emergence of a more secular climate of opinion, etc. have led to our modern perception of death.

The effect of the Reformation was to remove the buffer of purgatory from the eschatological system - a development which must certainly have had a substantial impact on perceptions of death (although there is evidence that belief in purgatory continued, especially in relatively isolated areas, for at least a century afterwards). The effect of this loss can confidently be supposed to have been an increase in anxiety about death, since the majority of people - neither very good nor very wicked - who would formerly have expected a period in purgatory prior to salvation, would now face judgement which would damn or save their souls, and they would face it alone, without the possibility of intercession on their behalf. The Reformation made the dividing line between life and death much sharper; death was now the decisive moment. Also, the funeral ritual was stripped of its eschatological purpose - there was no longer any need for the dying person to be involved in his/her funeral preparations (a common practice before the Reformation) since it could not benefit his/her soul anyway. The ritual ties connecting the living and the dead, as mentioned in point 3) above, were, at least in theory, severed. The secularism of the funeral reached a peak in the sixteenth century, particularly for the

nobility, for whom its primary function came to be the affirming of the social standing of the heirs and associates of the deceased.

The principles mentioned in 1) and 2) above - that burial is not a contemporaneous fact and that physical death is not the moment of supreme significance - have also ceased to be true. The moment of physical death is seen today as the point at which the individual is irretrievably lost, and the burial ritual has been invested with the whole of the ceremonial significance of marking the loss of that individual from society, since there are no prior or subsequent ceremonies.

Gittings (1984:20) claims that the loss of beliefs 1), 2) and 3) mark the increase in anxiety aroused by death. I find the claim convincing that without these beliefs death is more traumatic, since burial constitutes a much sharper separation, and comfort can no longer be drawn from the ritual ties between the living and the dead. A society which holds these beliefs would therefore tend to find death less anxiety-provoking than one which does not. The situation might perhaps be more complex, however, since individuals and societies tend to develop strategies for coping with crises which cannot easily be measured against one another.

It is perhaps dangerous, given the limitations of this enquiry, to speak of the people of one point in time suffering more anxiety over death than those of another, as if 'anxiety' is a measurable entity. As John McManners (1981:62) remarks, in his exploration of 18th century French attitudes:

The oversimplified question, 'Did they fear death more than we do?' is impossible to answer. [...] what measurements can we devise to classify fear?

There is evidence, for example, that in times of famine and disease epidemics a 'panic threshold' might be crossed whereby people

There is evidence, for example, that in times of famine and disease epidemics a 'panic threshold' might be crossed whereby people become incapable of investing the usual degree of emotion in the deaths around them. McManners (1981:62) writes:

That familiarity breeds contempt can hardly be postulated of death, so far as our own final dissolution is concerned, but it may breed callousness to the deaths of others. 'No one wept for the dead,' said the fourteenth-century chronicler of the plague in Sienna, 'because everyone expected to die himself.'

The same apparent callousness has resulted in some cases from the over-exposure to death suffered by soldiers of recent wars, and, as McManners argues it should not be taken to indicate indifference to death. The majority of writers (Ariès (1974, 1981), Clarkson (1975), Gittings (1984, 1992) and Gorer (1965)), however, find that, for example, the greater degree of comfort provided by the eschatological beliefs of the Middle Ages would mitigate to some extent the anxiety aroused by death. Laurence (1989:76), writing about attitudes towards death in 17th century England, writes:

...it seems probable that people in the seventeenth-century did not grieve less than they do now, their relationships were not less intense, but, because death was a much more everyday occurrence, they were better prepared for it. They knew better how to invoke the resignation which is an important part of accepting death.

A number of writers, including Clarkson (1975), have discussed the influence of demographic transition on how people viewed death. Since the 18th century the population of England has steadily increased due to changes in the material environment, better food, clothing, and a housed population who are more resistant to diseases which the medical profession has become capable of curing or eradicating entirely. These developments have changed the way that death imposes on life, and it has to some extent become possible (except in periods of war) to live life untouched by death.



## **The Victorian period**

The Victorian era is the next period of interest in this brief history of perceptions of death. According to Gittings (1984:16) its aberrance, in terms of the general development of society's attitudes to death, is a result of the Victorians' attempt to 'turn back the clock' apparent in many aspects of their culture. Death in the Victorian period was invested with a religious fervour, which had as its unsound theological foundation a combination of the 'golden age' of medieval England and Puritan ideas. This led to the sort of sentimentality which is typical of the Victorian arts. The failure of the Victorians to rekindle 'medieval' religious zeal is attributed by Gittings (1984:16) to the intermittent emergence of individualism which made it impossible to face one's own death without anxiety and the death of loved ones without terrible sorrow. I mentioned above that she omits other factors which have contributed to responses to death. Nevertheless, it appears that the comparative resignation to death which the Victorians attempted to recapture had begun to evaporate during the late Middle Ages.

The Victorians should perhaps, in contradiction to Gorer's (1965:171) assertion that they celebrated death, be more accurately viewed as attempting to deny the reality of death. According to David Cannadine (1981:187) the historical picture whereby death in the Victorian era is seen as relatively easy compared to the trauma of death in the present day, may be mistaken. The modern 'denial of death' differs in that it is essentially hidden, but the Victorians wallowed in death until it ceased to have any true meaning. The assumption that ostentatious ceremony eases the prospect of death for the dying and grief for the survivors is unproved. He argues (1981:189-195) that contemporary bereavement is no more difficult to endure now than in the Victorian age because we view death in the present with more honesty than in the 'death-denying' Victorian era.

Graveyard euphemisms as well as much of the literature of the period

demonstrate this desire to create a new reality. A particularly striking tendency is the frequently expressed sentiment in children's literature that death is to be wished for and that those who die as children are lucky. Yudkin (1968:50) observes:

Can we imagine anyone today composing this *Hymn for Infant Minds*?

#### CHILD

Tell me, mamma, if I must die  
One day, as little baby died;  
And look so very pale, and lie  
Down in the pit-hole by his side?

#### MAMMA

[verse omitted]

These hands, and feet, and busy head,  
Shall waste and crumble right away;  
But though your body shall be dead,  
There is a part which can't decay.

The Victorian denial of death led to the development of interest in spiritualism - a means by which the finality of death could be diminished through contact with the 'other side'. Garland (1989:162) writes:

Christian spiritualists [...] seemed confident, [...] for whether through their old religious beliefs or because of their communications with the spirits of the departed, their hope for personal immortality was reinforced.

### **The 20th century**

We would expect the attitude towards death in the twentieth century

## **The 20th century**

We would expect the attitude towards death in the twentieth century western world to have been shaped by the devastation of the world wars. David Cannadine (1981:189) argues that the impact of World War I on attitudes to death has been underrated by academics - its significance, he claims, was profound for at least a generation, and interwar Britain was probably more obsessed with death than at any other time in the modern era. This seems convincing given the level of exposure of combatants to death and the fact that almost every family in Britain suffered at least one untimely bereavement during the same short space of time. Cannadine (1981:197) writes:

‘Men of whatever age’, Harold Macmillan recalls, ‘are not often confronted with death - certainly not violent death. Now we lived with death, day by day.’

Cannadine (1981:193-194) argues with Ariès' (1974, 1981) chronology of changes in modern attitudes. He distinguishes between the ‘celebration of death’ which was on the wane from the 1880s and the ‘glorification of death’ which was markedly on the increase from around that time. The ‘denial of death’ assumed by Ariès to date from around 1945, was well underway by 1914, although death in battle was still thought worthy of glorification. Interestingly, he provides evidence to show that many cultural commentators of the time saw this tendency of ‘denying’ death as an improvement compared to the ‘morbid’ fascination exhibited in the Victorian era.

The losses of World War I were rendered more difficult to bear, according to Cannadine (1981:196), by the huge drop in the death rate of young people over the previous decades. The war shattered recently developed attitudes formed to some extent by expectations of long life. The church seemed unable to cope with so much mortality and grief and suffered from an unprecedented drop in congregations from which it has never recovered.

people were perhaps relieved that the casualties were nowhere near as large as in the first war, and comforted by the belief that this was a far more worthwhile war. There seems also to be a sentiment running through the expressed attitudes of the time that the pre-1914 innocence had been lost for good and that death in World War II had not the same power to shock as that in World War I.

The second half of the twentieth century has seen further developments which have resulted in death taking on a more global aspect than ever before. The creation of the atomic bomb has meant that, for the first time in history, global death has become a possibility. The considerable anxiety that this realisation first aroused has, however, subsided since the end of the Cold War.

In the present day, the contemplation of death can be terrifying, chiefly as a result of the lack of belief in resurrection and the after-life (beliefs which are often, unsurprisingly, embraced by those facing death or suffering bereavement). A common modern cause of anxiety is the perceived loneliness of death, stemming perhaps from demographic changes and changes in the family structure, as well as from our desire to push death to the fringes of our experience so that it has minimum visibility and affect upon our lives.

## **Conclusions**

In the light of the above, we would appear to be justified in concluding that the general perception of death has undergone significant changes during the period in question. Death, for reasons which include the growth of individualism and changes in the eschatological system of beliefs, appears to be more anxiety-provoking now than formerly. We must bear in mind, however, that we know little about personal perspectives on death from the distant past and that comparison is therefore difficult.

## Linguistic correlations

This chapter has been concerned with changes in the conceptual area 'death' which is covered by the semantic field 'Death'. At the beginning of the chapter (p.63), appeared the claim that a language is conditioned by the perceptions of those who speak it. The following points are suggested as ways in which changing perceptions of death are reflected in the language.

- 1) It has been a basic assertion of this thesis that areas of human experience which arouse anxiety are surrounded by euphemistic language. Death, throughout the history of English, has been a major cause of concern and there has been a continuous supply of euphemistic language with which to discuss it.
- 2) We saw in chapter 3 (p.75) that a number of metaphors dealing with the destructive nature of death appear only in OE. Metaphors based on the physical act of dying have emerged again in PDE but these tend to be restricted to contexts in which their use is clearly dysphemistic whereas the OE metaphors are contextually euphemistic. The ability of our medieval ancestors to employ such metaphors euphemistically might reflect the view put forward by Boase (1972: 44-45) that they had a greater tolerance than ourselves for the 'gory details' of death (see also p.109).
- 3) We found that the Victorians tended to wallow in the sentiment of death but that this perhaps resulted from a desire to deny the reality of death. The language which entered the semantic field 'Death' during the 19th century appears to reflect both the desire to prettify death (*go to glory, succumb*), and the growing need to diminish it (*turn one's toes up, croak, snuff it*).
- 4) We saw in chapter 2 that dysphemism performs the function of enabling discussion of death which is evasive without the solemnity of euphemistic language. In chapter 3 we found that the semantic field 'Death' in PDE is more highly dysphemistic than ever before. In this chapter we have encountered a number of developments,

which might have encouraged this increase in dysphemistic language, such as:

- a) increase in anxiety over death (due to changes in eschatological beliefs, increased institutionalising of death, etc.) resulting in an increased desire to distance ourselves from it.
- b) lack of familiarity with death and rise in life-expectancy contributing to our ability to distance ourselves from death, often by means of humour.

5) I mentioned in the introduction (p.i) that the semantic field 'Death' as classified by the *Historical Thesaurus* is relatively self-contained, that is, there is little overlapping of the meanings within it with those of other semantic fields, by comparison with the overlapping between most other fields. In chapter 3 (p.95-96) I argued that ambiguity of forms is unlikely to be tolerated for long in this area of the language. I believe that this increased limitation of ambiguity and polysemy arises as a result of our perception of death as a particularly separate and unique experience, and from our desire that it should remain so.

6) In chapter 2 (p.53) it was observed that the semantic field 'Death' is the only field surrounding a taboo area which is not productive of 'swear' words. I would suggest that this, as in point 5) above, reflects our perception of death as a highly singular and particularly anxiety-provoking concept.

## **Chapter 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This short chapter will draw together the main points expressed in this thesis:

- 1) I have provided a description of semantic theory which provides a framework for the diachronic investigation of semantic fields.
- 2) I have explored the influence of taboo on the vocabulary and demonstrated its connection with euphemism and dysphemism.
- 3) I have developed a comprehensive theory of euphemism, and shown that dysphemistic language is not distinct from, but closely related to, euphemism.
- 4) Analysis of metaphor in synonyms for 'death' and 'die' revealed significant continuity from OE to PDE. Otherwise, the appearance and disappearance of particular metaphors at particular times seemed to reflect changing perceptions of death.
- 5) Comparison of synonyms for 'death' and 'die' in 1400 and in 1950 demonstrated that this area of the language has become increasingly dysphemistic.
- 6) I have argued that this area of the language has been shaped at least to some extent by changing perceptions of death.

#### **Implications for further study**

The investigation of the semantic field 'Death' presented in this thesis is, of necessity, limited in its scope. The following points are suggested as ways in which study in this area might proceed:

- 1) A comparative study of the field 'Death' in English with the

same semantic field of a non-Indo-European language. This might reveal more clearly the ways in which a semantic field is structured by the conceptual system of the speakers of the language of which it is a part.

2) A study of the semantic fields covering other taboo areas of the English language. Such an investigation might show whether the language surrounding taboo concepts other than 'death' have developed in a similar way, particularly as regards the increase in dysphemism.



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